

Male and Female He Created them

Genesis Live – Issues of Sexuality

Dursley Tabernacle Thursday 15th November 2012 – Revd Simon Helme

We have been studying Genesis in our church fellowship groups and also in this month's Sunday morning sermons. It raises lots of contemporary issues and tonight's topic is the issue of sexuality 'Male and female He created them'.

My father, like any self-respecting parent, hardly ever talked about religion and sex – much too private. He did his fair share of talking about politics mind. So apologies if I am venturing into territory that is sensitive and private. Do forgive me. I rarely do so on Sunday mornings because I know there are difference of opinions, inevitably on such private matters. Sunday worship I don't think is the place to cause controversy and disunity (although Jesus did). In a discussion evening hopefully you have the chance to talk back, to clarify, and reason together. What I share with you tonight is part of a thirty year journey I have made on some of these issues and I will try and speak with openness and integrity and I hope we can listen to each other, though inevitably I'll be sticking my neck out first in order to stimulate the discussion.

This topic can often be problematic in that it involves the passions, the emotions,. In this church there was a very divisive debate 15 years ago about sexuality when the URC had to make a decision about ordaining practicing homosexuals. Fortunately we don't have to make a decision tonight so I hope that will take the heat out of the discussion.

This topic involves real people, and real lives, and the wound and hurts that we all carry. Archbishop Runcie in General synod debate in 1987 on human sexuality said that in this earthly tabernacle of Christ's kingdom there are many mansions, and all of them are made of glass. We all fall short of the ideal – who is without sin. That shouldn't mean we abandon discussion. Mature Christian discipleship will bring all aspects of life, politics, belief, sex, money, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and ask the question – which way should we go. We are not our own. We are bought with a price – heard that last Remembrance Sunday. But we all fail and need forgiveness. I hope that common need for God's grace will be the backdrop to our discussion tonight.

This topic is also problematic because the Christian faith has always been suspicious of the passions and emotions. They can make us irrational and out of control – when centuries of our faith have encouraged us to be self-controlled and not let sin get mastery of us – the reading on Sunday was about Cain and Abel and sin was mentioned for the first time in the Bible and described as a wild beast at your door ready to devour you (Genesis 4). The topic of sexuality can be threatening as it may be compared to looking at the beast within!

One day the Lord came to Adam to pass on some news. "I've got some good news and some bad news" said the Lord.

Adam looked at the Lord and said, "Well, give me the good news first."

Smiling, the Lord explained, "I've got two new organs for you. One is called the brain. It will allow you to be very intelligent, create new things and have intelligent conversations with Eve. The other organ I have

for you is a called a penis. It will allow you to reproduce your own intelligent new lifeform and populate this planet. Eve will be very happy that you now have this organ to give her children."

Adam, very excited, exclaimed "these are great gifts you have given me. What could possibly be bad news after such great tidings?"

The Lord looked upon Adam and said with great sorrow, "the bad news is that when I created you I only gave you enough blood to operate one of these organs at a time."

I do hope we can engage brain tonight and look at some issues which I think are vital for the future of the church and the reception of the gospel in this country. I have recently done an essay for my Master's degree on Predicting Religion in the Britain.

Callum Browns' *The Death of Christian Britain*¹ attempts to explain the demise of Christianity in Britain by suggesting that cultural changes in the 1960s brought a revolution to the role of women. Women's liberation and the advent of the contraceptive pill gave greater freedom to women. They were no longer prepared to be the carriers of piety on behalf of the nation as a whole. Their new found lifestyles were at odds with the more puritanical and reserved environment of the church. There was more fun to be had outside of the church than in it and so off they went.

It is significant that just as the hormones really kick in, so we find an exodus of teenagers from church life. Churches are just awkward around the topic of sex.

A recent survey of young people aged 16-25 reported that when asked what comes into their mind when they think about church, the overwhelming response was 'anti – gay' and 'prejudiced/bigots'.

Our perceived stance on sex and gays is a real gospel issue and it seems to be preventing people from hearing that gospel.

Whilst the Conservative Party realised ten years ago that the equal treatment of gay people had become a litmus test of basic human decency, and changed its view, it is a test that the church seems to be spectacularly failing in.

While the church readily blesses the second and third marriages of couples who scarcely darken its doors, it refuses its blessing to hundreds of its own faithful clergy and laypeople, who wish to bring love and commitment before God. The church's employment and disciplinary practise regularly punishes the truthful and rewards the deceitful. African churches in countries where people can be put in prison or even executed for having homosexual tendencies , are appeased in their aggressive opposition to homosexuality. Such is the political fear of disunity and the fear of losing financial backing from wealthy conservative supporters that blackmail and bigotry have been met with appeasement and capitulation. This seems like morality turned upside down.

Not only are gay people repelled by this (and think the Church is public enemy number one) but many more people of straight forward goodwill who instinctively expect the church to uphold justice and truth are scandalised when it so obviously does not. If in recent years secularism has gained ground in Britain, with the demand that the Church of England be

disestablished and surrender its national voice. It is the 'gay issue' that I believe is one of the factors that has brought that cultural shift about.

I hope I have set up this evening's discussion nicely. We will split it into three sections – the first half we will look briefly at sexual politics and then at sexual ethics. The second half, after a tea break, will focus on the issues of gay partnerships. With each section I shall talk for a while about some of the issues and be out loud honest with you about where I am on some of these matters –then I will let you discuss around your table your response and we will have some communal feedback.

Let us pray:

God you are the creator of all and we thankyou for your love hat sustains the universe and gives us life. Thankyou that you created us male and female, of complex sexuality; beautiful people yet vulnerable and fragile. Help us tonight to understand our complexity, to handle our vulnerabilities in love and take care of our fragilities. May the presence of your Spirit protect us and guide us into all truth. Make us ever mindful of the presence of Jesus in our midst. In his name we pray. Amen.

Sexual Politics:

One day (after being thrust out of the garden), Adam and Abel are walking past the Garden of Eden.

Abel: "So, Dad, you and Mom used to live in there, huh?"

Adam: "Yes, son, it was lovely."

Abel: "Why did you leave?"

Adam: "Your mother ate us out of house and home."

One day in the Garden of Eden, Eve calls out to God, "Lord, I have a problem!"

What's the problem, Eve?"

"Lord, I know you've created me and have provided this beautiful garden and all of these wonderful animals, and that hilarious comedy snake, but I'm just not happy."

"Why is that, Eve?" came the reply from above.

"Lord, I am lonely. And I'm sick to death of apples."

"Well, Eve, in that case, I have a solution. I shall create a man for you."

"What's a 'man', Lord?"

"This man will be a flawed creature, with aggressive tendencies, an enormous ego and an inability to empathize or listen to you properly. All in all, he'll give you a hard time. But, he'll be bigger & faster and more muscular than you. He'll be really good at fighting and kicking a ball about and hunting fleet-footed ruminants, and not altogether bad in bed."

"Sounds great," says Eve, with an ironically raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, well. He's better than a poke in the eye with a blunt stick. But, you can have him on one condition."

"What's that, Lord?"

"You'll have to let him believe that I made him first."

A lot of mischief has been done with the story of Adam and Eve and other texts in scripture that have oppressed women and sanctified patriarchy for centuries.

I think it's really helpful to focus as closely as possible on the canonical texts, which seldom are as obnoxious as the tradition does with them, and which often do not actually say what people claim they do.

One great example is Phyllis Trible's focus on Genesis 2-3 (in her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*). She has (convincingly in my view) argued against translating the Hebrew Adam (which can mean either gendered "man" or inclusively-gendered "human") as a gendered term until very late in the text. The text is more subtle than its readers, and does not make it clear whether the woman came out of the man, or whether the woman is brought out of an omni-gendered or un-gender-differentiated human (an idea which existed in the ancient world). That second reading may not be the likeliest reading, but it is a possible one, and tussling out which way you go makes clear that the very act of reading and speaking the words involves interpretive choices.

Her take on Genesis 3 is perhaps still more illuminating, and she and others worked for many years to see that translations make clear that the woman's husband was present in the whole serpent/fruit enterprise, albeit a voiceless, passive, accepting partner. "She also gave some [of the fruit] to her husband, *who was with her,* and he ate it" (Gen 3:6b, NIV). This allows one to consider anew several points. If the man is truly prior to the woman and somehow in charge, why is he so much in the background? If the man was truly prior, why didn't he correct the woman's and serpent's misquoting of the Lord's command? If the man was *with her*, then was he not also a full participant in being deceived or being disobedient?

Likewise, the 1 Timothy text does NOT "blame the sin of the world on women." It makes an argument for male priority, which it then inadvertently problematizes with its claim that "Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner" (1 Tim 2:14, NIV). In order to blame the sin of the world on women, you have to a) make the interpretive leap that Eve's sin was world-altering, infecting Adam by touch and all her offspring by blood/DNA, b) ignore the Genesis text where Adam lands in hot water, c) make the authoritative Adam/man completely powerless and irrelevant to this story. A close focus on this text reveals that its claims do not stand on a very firm foundation of prior scripture.

A close reading of the texts almost always makes it difficult to make oppressive, universal claims about them. If the hardest question is "What does it all mean?" then I propose that the texts of scripture themselves are a better starting point than the grand theological baggage that has been hung upon them.

It's interesting that when the Quran tells the story, the man and the woman, instead of hiding and blaming each other and the serpent, prostrate themselves and ask forgiveness, and God

grants it immediately. The curse doesn't on take the same importance as in Christian interpretations. It does seem to me that when we have done what we realize was wrong, foolish, or dangerous, we do tend to turn against each other. There's a level of realism in the story that runs counter to the surrealism of it too. Since I don't read it as historical, I find it easier to accept the notion that it says something profound about what human beings do in relationship to God, earth, animals, and each other.

Just a couple of thoughts, the serpent in many ancient and pagan traditions was a symbol of wisdom, the whole idea of the serpent being "condemned" to eat the dust can be taken a different way if we keep in mind that "from dust we came and to dust we shall return" dust seems that it might be "holy." Also, Eve has the first theological debate AND she is a woman! Adam was a passive and submissive bystander to a great theological conversation with wisdom.

Imagine if this text had been interpreted this way over the years, would we be where we are now?

Tony Campolo the great American Evangelical Baptist preacher was speaking at Greenbelt this year about Power and authority. He said power is inversely related to love. Whoever has power in a relationship exercises the least love. In a marriage for example a man can come and go. The wife is in love with him and will do anything for him. Who is in control? Who can dictate the terms in the relationship? He has power and control but he has not love. More you love the more vulnerable you become. That's why the stoic philosophers said don't love anyone because you will become vulnerable. Jesus became vulnerable as he hung on the cross. Can't express love without giving up power.

Campolo said that every time he speaks in family conferences there is always a man who asks the question: who's supposed to the head of the house.

I must interject at this point and say that my wife is happy for me to be the head of our household, so long as she is the neck who turns the head!

Campolo said real Christian never ask that question – who is master. Jesus says never ask can I be the master – instead be someone's servant. In my kingdom those who would be master should be servant. Who's the head of household? Bible says (Eph 5) women submit to husband. Next verse – husband love wives as Christ loved church and gave himself for it. He loved church by becoming a slave for it – gave himself up for the church. What women would not submit themselves to a man who would be her slave? If she is being submissive and he being a slave who is in charge? Try Jesus. Be in dialogical relationship to discover what Christ wants done in the home.

Campolo said the feminist movement were correct when they said they were fed up with pushy dominating obnoxious men. But they were also right when said the answer to that is not to replace them with pushy, dominating, obnoxious women. Wives and husbands submit to yourselves in love – each esteeming each other in love. 'My hopes dreams and aspirations – sacrifice so can be everything you want to be' – but then wife says 'no I sacrifice myself'. First argument – only argument allowed in scripture. Outdo each other in love! Esteem each

other better than yourselves. Marriages are falling apart because too many power games. Too many control freaks. Can't breathe in this relationship. Jesus set us free. Esteem each other in love.

Is church leadership male? Jesus was male, his disciples were male – goes the argument. He was also Jewish, and a carpenter – how far do you want to go? Women were treated as second class in Jesus day and he started a revolution in male- female relations. Talking to women at the well, being non dismissive of their presence, appearing to women first after on Easter day – making them the first apostles. Some of the early church leaders were women, people like Lydia and Phoebe and many scholars suggest that some of the later epistles in the new testament were written putting women in their place, don't talk in assemblies, wear hats, don't be in leadership, because the early church was scandalizing the surrounding culture who couldn't handle this radical departure in gender politics.

The Congregational denomination was the first mainline Christian denomination to have women ministers. We judge not on gender but on whether God has called and equipped with his Spirit. This is the new community of Pentecost where there is neither male nor female, slave or free, the old barriers and demarcations have broken down - we are one in the spirit. (Galatians 3)

Sexual ethics

Times have changed.

When I was about 11 years old I remember sat in our family and listening to my father and mother discuss the latest piece of juicy gossip of how a friend's son had started living with a girl and they weren't married. My mother turned to me in the back of the car and said that's disgusting – if I ever find out that you are living in sin you will be out of my will.

My father took me aside when I was 15 and gave me the birds and bees talk in his own (I think he left it late because I hadn't been showing much promise on the girlfriend front up to then). It was the usual embarrassed male to male – this is awkward talking about these matters - kind of short conversation. It went like this 'girls can get you into trouble. Be careful. Keep your underpants on'.

It will be interesting to know what advice you were given by your parents and what advice we give to our children. In our youth group what advice do we give our young people today?

Someone that my wife works with was talking with Debbie the other month and saying how her daughter is about to go to University. 'I've put her on the pill' she said 'and given her a supply of condoms and told her to have fun. If you can't enjoy yourself at this age when can you'

Traditional marriage – one virgin man and virgin woman becoming the only sexual partner the other will have for the rest of their lives – isn't working - in fact it is surprisingly rare and nearly an endangered species. Before marriage, premarital sex is the norm, not the exception, for Christians as well as non-Christians. The average sexual debut is about 16 years old. Most teenagers are bragging that they lost their virginity before the legal age of consent. Teenagers are of course less likely to use contraception and therefore increase the likelihood of pregnancy and STDs. *We have epidemic levels of sexual diseases such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea.* But the problems aren't only before marriage: divorce rates are startlingly high for Christians as well as those who are not Christians. It's hard to square the frequently heard argument that tolerance of homosexuality weakens the institution of marriage when heterosexual church-goers are having divorces at rates not very different from their religious neighbours.

I share these observations not to load more guilt on already guilty people. But being a human being at this point in history makes it all the more difficult to navigate our sexual lives. The opportunities for promiscuity may never have been greater and the supports for chastity and fidelity never weaker.

Consider these realities:

We've moved from villages where everyone knows your name and where nearly everyone is committed to the same moral standards, to cities where we're all virtually anonymous and where anything goes sexes and community are less connected than ever before.

We're the first humans to have low cost, readily available birth control, making sex and pregnancy less connected than ever before.

We're the first human to have condoms and antibiotics readily available, making sex and disease less connected than ever before.

We've created an economic system that increasingly requires both men and women to work outside the home, in company with members of the opposite sex, thus increasing the possibilities for extra marital attractions to develop and become sexual.

We've created an economic system that rewards education and punishes early marriage, pushing the average of marriage higher and higher. As a result, we've put the biological peak for sex and reproduction further out of sync with the cultural norms for marriage than ever before.

Meanwhile a number of factors are bringing the average age of puberty lower and lower, leaving more years than ever during which sexually mature people are likely to be single, and therefore likely to engage in sex outside marriage.

The internet has made pornography ubiquitous; the advertising industry continuously exploits onscreen sex to sell everything. As a result sexual simulation has become virtualised and universalised. *a recent report suggested that children as young as 11 are getting addicted to it and how it is de sensitising young people to sex and how they treat the opposite sex, with*

girls particularly expected to do more and more extreme sexual practices - boundaries, as ever, are being pushed and pushed.

The print, onscreen and online ubiquity of the ‘perfect body’ in ‘virtual reality’ – fully or nearly fully exposed, often cosmetically and digitally enhanced – can create images of sexual perfection compared to which nearly all actual partners will disappoint, thus increasing sexual tension in actual relationships.

The combination of poverty, unemployment and life in slums, camps etc. puts millions of people together with literally nothing to do, day after day, increasing the likelihood of casual sexual contact among people without the resources to raise children they conceive.

When you consider these and the many other factors that are working against sexual sanity and health I’m amazed that we are doing as well as we are. *In this culture and context what can we say as Christians, that won’t be laughed at or considered priggish or prudish?*

The longer we hide the truth about our sexuality in all its beauty and its agony, passion and pain, simplicity and complexity, the sicker we will be. Perhaps – our anxiety about this provides a reason why we’re focusing so much displaced energy on gay people and on our disagreements about how to deal with them. It’s a lot easier to make them the problem than to face the deeper problems we all face as sexual – spiritual creatures, women and men.

When I was young the message banged home to me was no sex before marriage. Keep yourself pure and holy. The biblical norm was for chastity.

To be honest the biblical material is somewhat mixed. In bible times you were usually married as soon as the onset of puberty in early teens. But you were dead by your early forties so you had to get on with it. Marriages were arranged, and usually arranged out of social economic reasons to do with survival. Marriages were usually polygamous with some concubines thrown in as a side dish! The bible is not a good place to go to for examples of good sexual ethics. Romance hardly got a look in. The song of songs in the Old Testament is erotic literature for the upper classes who had time and wealth on their side to indulge in courtly love. The story of Ruth is the desperate struggle of a widow in a foreign land to survive – what does she do? – get a bloke drunk and jumps on him (or in euphemistic OT language, uncovered his feet – which accurately translated means ‘to expose everything below the belt’ – and Boaz wakes up and is startled!

Paul, in 1 Cor, advocates chastity and celibacy because the Lord is imminently returning. But if you burn with passion better to marry than be led into sin. Marriage was grudgingly accepted if you couldn’t hold your passion in check.

Christianity has inherited a pollution theory of sexuality. Thanks to St Augustine who believed that original sin was passed through intercourse and conception we have had a lingering sense that somehow sex is dirty. A reading of the Leviticus code in the Old Testament is about what is clean and unclean and a number of those codes have to do with

semen, and menstrual fluids and pronouncements about what is clean and unclean. No one quite knows what ancient wisdom or prejudice lay behind these laws – whether it was a primitive hygiene system or not. But those taboos were carried over in to Christianity which still reverberate. . For example it was taken for granted in the early church that menstrual woman should not take the sacrament. That influence may still be felt by some who are uncomfortable with women administering communion. And being ordained to the priesthood.

(1Sam 21.1-6)

Jesus of course seems to have ignored most of the pollution taboos – touching lepers and corpses, allowing himself to be touched by women who themselves were in a state of ritual impurity. And he railed against the hypocrisies of the whole ceremonial system.

Presumably because it was at heart about access to God and that at the end of the day access to God was not about purity of the body but purity of the heart. Jesus internalized value and virtue. He demystified access to God.

Our bodily functions have been largely demystified today. Pleasure is the principle today. If it feels good do it.

How do we therefore find a sexual ethic for today?

How can we talk wisely and handle sanely something as complex as sexuality?

Christian theology is gradually recovering a sense that we don't need to be afraid of the pleasures of our bodily nature. But it still wants to suggest that we remember that these pleasures are a sign and seal of unity, relatedness and bondedness. . For the Christian sex should be part of a covenant between two persons, because it is a reflection or earthly representation of the covenant or marriage between God and his people and Christ and his church. Sex is the outward and visible sign of the mutual commitment that is achieved in a true relationship.

Theoretically, human beings could achieve that level of commitment with more than one person. But experience has told us that given our distracted and selfish nature it doesn't work out like that. To succeed in developing trusting human relationships we need to concentrate, which is another way of saying we need to be faithful.

Christians try to live under that authority of a particular vision or revelation, though they differ about how to. We are not compelled to do this. The vision is there and we are drawn to it and try to grow into it. We believe that it is a vision of what is ultimately real. To conform to it, however slowly and painfully is health giving and satisfying because it conforms us to reality. To run against the grain of reality makes us unhappy because it distorts us and gets us out of one with things.

The Christian vision of sexuality is extremely high and affirmative. When we reach the ideal at its highest representation, in truly surrendered and covenanted love, we are mirroring the

very life of God. When we decline from that standard, we are going against the grain of things, and in the long run, it tells on us.

One drive is towards covenanted love – relationship, faithfulness, finding unity in relationship. But another drive, another law is at work pulling us away from our real joy. We pull away – God reassures us of His faithfulness; we play the harlot - God will wait for us.

Our promises and covenants, such as in a marriage ceremony are important. First of all because it is in the nature of true love to bind itself, to make a vow, or pledge. Strong confident love does it in an act of surrender and commitment – because it wants a new unity. Secondly, pledges, vows, can act as a restraint upon our weakness. They give us power when we are at our weakest. In any human endeavour of value and significance there comes a moment when we are tempted to desert. It is here that our promises may carry us.

We may think of our sexuality on a continuum that stretches from full covenantal relationship of marriage to the most casual sexual encounter. Casual promiscuity perhaps should be the object of our compassion rather than our condemnation, since much of it seems to be a flight from loneliness. You want to be held, loved, no matter how fleetingly. A bit of fun maybe - , but deeper than that perhaps it reveals an ability to make yourself vulnerable – to be independent but still needing to be united to someone. There are other relationships that are far from the ideal, but have something of the ideal in them. Many love affairs are of this sort. There is a genuine if disordered love in them. Yet there is always a meanness and deceit, a stealing of love in any affair.

Further up the continuum are those stable relationships between the unmarried. Many of these reflect many aspects of the ideal. A level of commitment and fidelity and we can affirm much. I find it difficult believe that God doesn't rejoice in such commitment and growth.

Rather than condemning people is a Christian ethic holding out to people a vision of the ideal and encouraging them towards it?

Gay relationships

Place of the homosexual in our society and in the church has been one of peculiar debate and difficulty.

It seems to be established in our society that a given percentage of the population, male and female, is constitutionally homosexual even transsexual. Arguments can range between 1 – 10% - but no one questions that there are people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Psychologists have suggested that there is a scale of sexuality at one extreme you have very homosexually active individuals – at the other very sexually active

heterosexuals and most people in the middle – with varying degrees of sexual activity and drives and needs.

Because homosexuals form a minority it can bring them a sense of being different from society, of being an outcast, often an object of fun, or ridicule and even hatred. Gay bashing is a constant theme in our culture – in purely naturalistic terms most species attack outsiders or odd and weak members of their own group. Most people regard homosexuality as abnormal, unnatural and therefore repulsive - or let least alien and puzzling.

To the homosexual it is their nom, their given nature; hence the bafflement and anger they feel in finding themselves in such a cruel predicament.

Let me tell you of my own story and journey in this. I was a gay basher. Working class roots in small town Lancashire a macho background meant any discussion of homosexuality was usually in abusive terms. Gays were objects of ridicule and jokes. My evangelical faith sadly didn't challenge that but actually perpetuated those attitudes. Homosexuals were abnormal, undermining God's plan for men and women and marriage. They were perverting the order of creation, a perversion which could be altered and changed and repented of but gays were godless and unrepentant and therefore objects of sin and God's wrath.

At university I was part of the evangelical Christian Union and was a leader within it. One of the friends I had became a Christian during those university years. We shared a house after graduating, with a couple of other lads. One day I came home and smelt gas. I went into my friend's room to find him almost unconscious with the gas fire on yet unlit. He was trying to commit suicide. We put that act down to the fact that he had recently split up with a girl he had only been seeing for a couple of weeks.

Fast forward a few years and my friend was now working on the other side of the world and I get a phone call in the middle of the day – the middle of his night, and he is at the point of taking his life again. It is then that I discover that the reason he wants to end his life is because he can't come to terms with being gay and being an evangelical Christian. He feels condemned as a sinner, worthless and is full of self-hatred. He feels God hates him and that I hate him. Let me tell you it rocked me to the core that my prejudices contributed to my friend wanting to take his life. When you are personally shaken your beliefs shake and are tested.

Not soon after these experiences another good friend of mine, who I just thought was a very deeply spiritual Christian, with a close relationship to God, who spoke in tongues, had charismatic spiritual gifts, told me he was gay. He told me his back story, how the charismatic church he had been brought up in had tried deliverance ministry on him a number of times to cast out the demon of homosexuality. He too had had a break down as a consequence and had become suicidal. But God had put him together again. God's grace had restored him and made him the sensitive and spiritually wise person I had befriended.

I was gobsmacked. A bit like Peter in Caesarea, Acts 10, where he is with Gentiles and experiences them speaking in tongues and receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he says can anyone withhold baptism from these people who have received the Holy Spirit. In other

words his world shifted. He thought that only those who were Jewish and circumcised could be the people of God but God's spirit had broken through the race barrier. For me it was seeing the spirit at work in those who I thought were previously perversions of what God willed that opened my eyes.

I believe in the transforming power of the Spirit. I believe that it is vital to have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. I hold to the creeds and the faith of the apostles. I have a high view of scripture believing it is the inspired word of God – but I also believe the bible is also the word of man mixed in there too and we need the Spirit to speak through scripture to bring us the living word of God. Word and Spirit. I went back to scripture to read those texts that on the face of it condemn homosexuality and homosexual acts. I was now open to reading them in different ways.

Most people do not follow through consistently with their claim that scripture is at every point inerrant and binding. I am puzzled why some regard the scriptural prohibitions of homosexuality as binding simply because they are in scripture and yet pass over, or relativize the prohibitions of say women preachers, or regulations regarding hairstyle (1 Cor 11, 1 Tim 2) or the limited grounds for divorce and remarriage. The Levitical prohibition against homosexuality (Lev 20) is set alongside the prohibition of a woman having sex during menstruation, to say nothing about eating shell fish (Lev 11). Leviticus does not simply say homosexuality is wrong but that homosexuals should be put to death. On what grounds do we follow the prohibition but not the penalty? You can't claim just to follow a biblical injunction simply because it's in scripture and then be selective in what you take from scripture. Many biblical conservatives employ exactly the same sort of arguments which on other matters, not least homosexuality, they condemn as 'getting round the plain meaning of scripture' or 'capitulating to the spirit of the age'.

Some argue that we should take the overall thrust of scripture which I think is a good thing. But then you have to decide which passages are relevant. How do you balance 1 Cor 13 all about patient love and Lev 20? The Ethiopian eunuch who would have been excluded from the old covenant was baptised into the new Acts 8:10 could we legitimately conclude that those excluded before by the old laws such as homosexuals would be included in the new covenant community.

There are debates within scripture and the biblical tradition is one which develops through critical self-examination. What was Jesus doing – he came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. He challenged those purity taboos – reaching out to those who had been excluded and denied access to God and a place in God's people. Revisions need not be defensive. The great themes of scripture are covenant love, flourishing, wholeness, grace and divine impartiality rather than ostracization and condemnation.

Sodom (genesis 19)– the sin committed was gang rape by a majority of presumably heterosexual men. The homosexual element in the act held no particular interest to the author (the violation of hospitality would have counted far worse a category of crime) cf. Matthew 10:14-15 where Jesus uses the example of Sodom in the context of the gospel not being

welcomed in certain towns and villages. Can one gain ethical guidelines from this ancient primitive story – where it is assumed perfectly right for Lot to offer his two daughters to be raped as substitutes for the two men?

Leviticus – author's main concern to encourage childbirth in situation of exile and resettlement of Israel. Counter syncretism by distinguishing sharply the ways of Jews from ways of Babylonians where tolerance of homosexuality was known. Holiness code is all about what sets Israel apart as holy. Highly selective to single out homosexuality – eg trimming ones beard, eat shellfish, weave two different kinds of yarn into same garment.

Jesus – do the gospels never mention homosexuality? There is an oblique reference to eunuchs (who are born this way) I Mathew 19.12. In Matthew 8.50-13, Luke 7.1-10 –healing of centurion's servant – miracles demonstrate Jesus divinity and power – and those considered unclean are included. Centurion and servant unclean. They were Gentiles and also Jews would have assumed they were gay lovers. Polemic against Romans. Evidence to show the charge was often true. Centurions' deep concern for the servant who was 'very dear to him' would have strengthened the suspicion. Jesus heals him. There is no command to 'go and sin no more'.

Paul – 1 Cor 6.9 and 1 Tim 1.10 homosexuality mentioned in passing in lists of sins. Perhaps word translated as homosexuality actually meant male prostitution. In Paul's society prostitution and pederasty (Greek pupil - tutor relationship between teenager and older man) were standard forms of homosexuality and likely to be in Paul's mind. Romns 1.18ff Paul argues homosexuality is against nature – not only against order of nature but against one's own nature. Paul does not seem to recognise a separate category of naturally homosexual people but views homosexuality as perverse and wilfully chosen.

There is the argument about Creation and natural law.

Biblical argument from creation: what is the purpose of sex? what was will of God in creating male and female? Primary reason not procreation but because it was not good for Adam to be alone. Complementarity and companionship are as least as much of God's plan in creation as childbirth. Childbirth is afterthought as part of Eve's punishment. Jesus and Paul stress quality of relationship in marriage but don't mention childbirth.

For Paul - sexual union always has spiritual consequences whether for good or for ill. Promiscuous sexual activity involves desecration of the body which is a temple of the holy spirit (1 Cor 6.15-20). Where sexual union expresses mutual love and commitment it becomes a 'mysterion' Eph 5.32 a holy mystery or sacrament reflecting the union of Christ and the church. A channel of love and grace.

Tradition is a mixed blessing. It can anchor you to the past but as Reformers we well know that we shouldn't give tradition the veto over the moving of the Spirit. Tradition cannot be a criterion of truth since we worship God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Our tradition is a living one ever changing as the world changes. There is always more light and truth to come from God's word otherwise we stifle the prophetic.

Natural law arguments, the catholic arguments, is that procreation is primary or at least an essential intended end of sexual relations and any that are not open to procreation are against the natural law. Hence no contraception. Most Protestants seem to believe that sex should serve the expression and enjoyment of a relationship of love and commitment even if possibility of procreation is prevented. No one would suggest that an infertile couple are not married. So therefore where is the difference in moral status between that relationship between an infertile couple and a gay relationship?

Natural argument is that it's natural for a man and woman to fall in love. The bits fit to put it crudely. God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve! Yet for people of homosexual orientation gay partnerships are experienced as being natural. We are constantly revising and adapting what is natural and normal for a greater good. If God had meant us to fly he'd have given us wings – was an early objection to aviation. In managing nature we have no qualms about adapting, altering or reversing natural bodily processes and functions in order to prolong or enhance life. Medicine and surgery are obvious examples. Even if accept demeaning view of homosexuality as a disorder or a handicap – we don't condemn the handicapped or disabled. One rather applauds and supports them. You can argue about whether autism is a genetic condition, or affected by environment, but we accept that people are autistic and we love them and try and affirm them.

Some argue that from genesis there are natural orders of creation. Built into creation is the complementarity of the sexes which constitutes the basis of heterosexual marriage. I don't think that is at issue. The issue concerns those of gay orientation and accepting that it is also natural that some are gay and that therefore what is natural for them is not natural for heterosexuals. But in the larger scheme of things this is the world we have.

Some argue it is not what we experience to be the case but what God wills to be the case for what is natural. God wills that male and female join together. Homosexuals are the victims of nature going wrong – not as God intends. Therefore the assumption is that gay orientation is against the will of God. John Bell said at Greenbelt this year that despite the fervent prayers of millions of fundamentalist Christians, God continues to create millions of gay people. Maybe we are not being open to how God wishes to bless us with the gift he is offering to us through gay people?

Does all this threaten social order and the fabric of society and marriage itself? It seems illogical. In what possible sense does a gay couple making lifelong vows to one another threaten or destabilise heterosexual couples who do the same? Theologically and socially the acceptance of same sex partners in covenant relationships do not overturn the institution of marriage and the family. Arguably it affirms it by extending it. At a pragmatic level society benefits when people are committed to caring for one another and are not left alone and reliant on the state. I do not condone promiscuity. I want to hold out to young people gay and straight the ideal of faithful permanent committed relationships because I believe generally speaking, that they offer the best environment to grow and be fulfilled. A lot of Christians, and I include myself in this, are appalled when they see the promiscuous and sexually open antics of the gay community (we often cast a blind eye on the antic in the heterosexual

community). If gay people were affirmed in their identity and given the ideal to aim for would that lead many away from, a casual promiscuous lifestyle. Surely that is a good thing.

Can social order exist with much diversity? Indeed it can and does exist with much diversity and that can give our society richness. And importantly a freedom, a freedom of expression and authenticity – to be who you are.

Why can't married heterosexual partnerships and gay partnerships co-exist and mutually support each other?

Great is the truth and it shall prevail. Can we respect the liberty of others we may disagree with. Some traditionalists accept the liberty to believe in and practice the headship of man over woman. They claim this liberty yet deny gay partners a similar liberty to follow their Christian conscience and conviction. Great are the Christian themes of liberty of conscience and of the freedom of the people of God. A catholic spirit which stresses the love of God for all. Can we respect those who differ from us? Church needs gay people as much as gay people need the church. If the church is to be the church of the whole people of God it needs to be enriched by gay people.

Ideologically there is no-difference between civil partnership and marriage since both rests on covenant promise of permanent and exclusive commitment between two people. Popular instinct agrees calling civil partnership 'gay marriage'. Many feel however that the official distinction in terms signifies and perpetuates discrimination in status with marriage the gold standard and civil partnership something less. So campaigners want it to be called marriage to be seen to be equal, equally holy, equally a gift and vocation from God to those who are called to it.

Jim, Cotter wrote twenty years ago:

There are four stages in the church's response to any challenges to its tradition. First, it pretends the challenge isn't here. Secondly, it opposes it vehemently. Thirdly it starts to admit extenuations and exceptions. Finally it says, 'that's what we really thought all along'.

What makes marriage sacramental is its nature as a faithful covenant which expresses God's likeness in us and reflects the love between Christ and his church.

The Church's opposition to gay marriage is I believe having a detrimental effect on our mission and the hearing of the gospel. One final story – again told by Tony Campolo at greenbelt this year. Campolo told how recently in the State of California – proposition 8 was to be voted on by the population. It was an attempt to take away from gay people certain rights and privileges that the courts had previously given them. Evangelicals believed that gays had no right to marry and churches organised themselves to campaign to take the right away from them. 1000s of volunteers knocked on doors - not to tell them about Jesus and love of God but to get them to vote against gays. Spent over 82 million dollars for ads on TV and media to vote against gays. Day after election the evangelicals were clapping hands.. We won we won they shouted. But what did they win asked Campolo. Did Harry and Bob not climb into bed that night? Did Mandy and Linda not regard themselves as married because

proposition 8 had been passed. Nothing had changed. But what had changed was that the following weekend thousands of gays marched streets in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and other cities screaming their hatred of the church as if bible was written to beat them into submission and Jesus was the enemy. Campolo said ‘if you call that winning you and I are not on same page. They thought they had won but they had actually lost.’

I want to be part of a church that is known for its compassion and love, a church that includes not excludes, a church that points people in the right way to find that fulfilling perfect love that cast out fear and brings people together in commitment and faithfulness.

ⁱ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, Routledge, London, 2001