

Evidence from Reform to Episcopal Working Group on Sexuality

“The House of Bishops announced that it intended to draw together material from the listening process undertaken within the Church of England over recent years in the light of the 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution on human sexuality. It also committed itself to offering proposals on how the continuing discussion within the Church of England about these matters might best be shaped in the light of the listening process. The task of the new group is to help the House discharge its commitment to produce a consultation document in 2013. The membership of another group, advising the House on its review of the 2005 civil partnership statement, was announced on 1 December.”

This document looks at four main areas

- Listening to the Bible;
- Listening to the Church;
- Listening to the cultural mood; and concludes by asking the question
- What does it mean to listen?

1. LISTENING TO THE BIBLE

Summary of biblical arguments

- Genesis 1-2
 - These foundational verses affirm marriage as a creation ordinance (endorsed by Jesus and Paul): i.e., that marriage is a “good” for those of all faith and none.
 - Marriage is affirmed as “one man and one woman for life”, particularly Gen 2:24 implies it is:
 - Public (it is a public social event as well as private sexual joining)
 - Permanent (hence some speak of its indissolubility)
 - Procreative (it is the context for raising children)
 - Marriage is described as a parable of Christ’s relationship with Church (Eph 5), not an afterthought or mere convenience.
- Sodom, Levitical texts
 - Much is made of the fact that the sin of Sodom is more than sexual sin (including breaches of hospitality and property etc.). There is merit in these interpretations, but later biblical texts assume that homosexual activity is sinful citing the sin of Sodom in this context (2 Pet 2:6; Jude 7)
 - The use of the Levitical codes for making moral pronouncements today is often questioned. This is popularly summarised as “why if I think it is OK to eat all food and wear mixed fabric shirts do I still argue that ‘a man lying with another man’ is unclean/sinful.?” The framing of the question this way fails to deal with the different kinds of uncleanness which Leviticus deals with (one being cultural/social; the other moral).
- Romans 1:18-32
 - The question of “what is against nature” is addressed below (Rom 1:26)
 - Rom 1:27 specifically condemns male-to-male sexual activity (Rom 1:27)

- 1 Cor 6
 - The Church in Corinth was made up of those who were previously “... the sexually immoral ... idolaters ... adulterers ... male prostitutes ... homosexual offenders” (1 Cor 6:9) alongside the greedy, drunkard and swindler, etc. (“Such were some of you”) whose lives had been transformed (“washed, sanctified, justified”, v11).
 - Christians recognise the need to show love; not to condemn; to build true Christian community, and to affirm the power of the Gospel *both* to condemn sin *and* to transform repentant lives through the Gospel and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Detailed notes on Romans 1 (please see *Conduct which Honours God?* by Simon Vibert, Orthos 14, FWS for full argument)

1) The revelation of Righteousness and the revelation of Wrath

1:17 - The revelation of righteousness (first to Jew then to Gentile)

1:18 – the revelation of wrath (*orge*) against godlessness (*asebia* = dishonouring God) and wickedness (*adkikia* = attacking God’s just order)

2) What causes God’s wrath to be manifested?

a) The knowledge of God is denied (v18)

a. It is “plain”

“clearly (*kathoratai*) seen”; to render human beings excuseless (v20)

b. It is “suppressed”

... *katechein* ... “to hold down”

c. it results in “vanity”

... “vain” (*mataioimai*) = emptiness, breath, vapour... vain.

... 2 main strands - “emptiness/vanity in life” – Ecclesiastes

- “worship of idols/vanities” – Jer 10:14f.

“claimed to be wise... but were actually fools”

“Exchanged the glory due to God the creator for worship of creatures”

Morna Hooker shows the link with Genesis 1:20-27

a) The human problem began with false worship.

b) God’s wrath is primarily directed against false worship and the perverted behaviour is a consequence of human beings rejecting him

3) How does God react to human rebellion?

“God gave them over”.

A downwards spiral of behaviour follows God’s judgement in Romans 1 (the various stages introduced by ‘therefore’, ‘because of this’, ‘furthermore’....)

a) V24f “Therefore” God gave them over so that heterosexual relationships are degraded

“sexual impurity” and “degrading of bodies” perhaps implies fornication and adultery?

b) V26f. “Because of this” God gave them over to homosexual practice

“exchanged natural” for “unnatural”. Exactly what does this mean?

Is “against nature” – against human nature? Michael Vasey represents a revisionist interpretation:

Nature to Paul is not simply what biology dictates; it is a construct of biology and culture. This is not to argue that there is no mandate written into creation but it makes it harder to identify what this mandate is.

Vasey took issue with Aquinas’ famous list of sins against nature which were: bestiality, homosexual sex, non-procreative heterosexual sex, masturbation.

c) So, the question of what is “against nature” is critically important to establish

i. The departure from the created order

Cf 1 Cor 11

ii. The distinction between “inversion” and “perversion” is anachronistic

Paul is not arguing at the level of genetics or at the level of feelings

He is rather speaking about behaviour.

iii. Society, cultural and ethical disintegration vv28ff.

- abandoning knowledge of God
- depraved mind ... not knowing right from wrong
- filled with every kind of wickedness
- inventing ways of doing evil
- no understanding, no love, no truth
- but, they know God’s righteous decrees but continue to practice evil and approve of others in the same path.

Romans 1:18ff – this speaks of the downward spiral resulting from God’s condemnation on humanity

- Futility of our minds
- The degrading of our bodies

Romans 12:1ff – this speaks of the hope offered in the Gospel and the renewal offered

- Renewing of our minds
- The dedication of our bodies

Conclusion to “listening to the Bible”

a) Listening to the Bible is primary as Canon A5 states: “The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal”.

b) The biblical condemnation of homosexual practice is clear throughout the Bible.

c) The power of the Gospel includes within it an expectation that lives will be changed and that new Christians will be adopted in the Church where love, care, joy and fellowship may be experienced.

2. LISTENING TO THE CHURCH

Key Reports

a) Lambeth (1998) 1.10 on Human Sexuality – *met with unequivocally positive reception by conservative evangelicals.*

Resolution 1:10 stated:

This Conference:

1. commends to the Church the subsection report on human sexuality;
2. in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;
3. recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;
4. while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex;
5. cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;
6. requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us;

7. notes the significance of the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Human Sexuality and the concerns expressed in resolutions IV.26, V.1, V.10, V.23 and V.35 on the authority of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality and asks the Primates and the ACC to include them in their monitoring process.

2) House of Bishops statement 1991 *Issues in Human Sexuality* – often thought to be a flawed document in the way in which it suggested double standards for lay and clergy:

a) *The definition of love*

4.0 The Phenomenon of Homosexual Love (Section 4) seems to define love in terms of feelings which are unable to be controlled; whereas the church has traditionally sought to define love according to God's own standards and revelation;

b) *The appearance of double standards for clergy and laity. Moreover, Bishops are discouraged from asking clergy ordinands directly about their practice.*

5.9 The rejection by some homophiles of 'coupledom' *"is simply a pretentious disguise for the evil of promiscuity"*.

5.10 On paedophilia, *"It is mistaken and unjust to assume, for example, that children in school or in a church choir are particularly at risk from gay or lesbian members of staff."* Paedophilia *"is a sin not only against chastity but also against charity and justice"*.

5.11 *"We believe that the great majority of such clergy are not in sexually active partnerships."*

5.12 affirmation of those *"who believe that the right way of life for them is that of an exclusive and permanent but also sexually active partnership"?*

5.14-17 Therefore *"at this time"* clergy in homosexual relationships would be thought to be unacceptable to the church and would provide poor models *"given the present understanding of such partnerships in the Church as a whole."* They *"would be seen as placing that way of life in all respects on a par with heterosexual marriage as a reflection of God's purposes in creation. The Church cannot accept such a parity and remain faithful to the insights which God has given it through Scripture, tradition and reasoned reflection on experience."*

5.18-19 However Bishops should not actively enquire about the status of same-sex relationships and those who "come out" but pledge abstinence, should be accepted and allowed to practice their ministry.

5.21 *"We therefore call upon all clergy to live lives that respect the Church's teaching"*.

3) House of Bishops statement *Some Issues in Human Sexuality Church House Publishing, 2003* – a more thorough document with clearer conclusions

• **The report is thorough in terms of the range of current issues which it discusses**

a) It looks at the background and nature of the common debate about some aspects of human sexuality, recognising the diversity that exists in society, in the Church of England and the Church as a whole.

b) It examines the theology of human sexuality including examination of the issues of homosexuality, bisexuality and trans sexuality. This includes looking at writing from feminist, gay and lesbian theologians.

c) It considers the place of homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals in the life of the church and the pastoral implications in the light of the current diversity of views inside and outside the Church. (p.318)

- **The report is theologically robust.**

The three main biblical chapters are two, three and four which examine the hermeneutical principles involved in reading the ancient text and applying it to the modern world; the theology of sexuality from a biblical point of view, including a restatement of what is entailed in being Christ's disciple; finally, in chapter four, an examination of the key traditional biblical texts relating to homosexuality. The authors interact with modern and ancient writings on the subject and include some of the most recent seminal works, such as *True Union in the Body* (D. Gomez, A. Goddard and P. Walker, Future of Anglicanism, Oxford, 2002), *The Way Forward* (Ed. T. Bradshaw, SCM Press, London, 2003) and *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (R. Gagnon, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2001).

- **The report is pastorally sensitive.**

The following quote exemplifies the style in which the report is written:

... It always needs to be remembered that issues to do with human sexuality are issues that involve real people with real feelings that can be hurt. In Scripture as a whole, and particularly in the ministry of Christ, we see that God addresses and ministers to people as individuals, and those engaged in pastoral care need to take this as their model. (p.315f.).

It is also recognised throughout, that to be truly pastorally caring involves 'helping people to walk in obedience to the will of God...' (p.316). This means that Church needs, not only to understand the issues, but to give a pastorally sensitive and clear lead.

- **The report is definitive.**

The report is careful and cautious in style. It makes the effort, it seems to us, to allow each 'voice' to be heard and listened to sensitively. For the authors this means, listening to each other, listening to the tradition of the Church and continuing to listen in the future (p.312f.). Having done this listening, the report concludes that the historical, traditional stance on homosexuality (namely that same sex sexual activity is contrary to Scripture and tradition) has been endorsed, and, whilst diversity of views exist, it should not be inferred from that that all diversity carries the same weight or requires equal acceptance (p.310). The author's helpfully point out

... ethics, including sexual ethics, also matter if the Church is to live up to its calling. The will of God for his people is that they should be holy as he is holy, and this means walking in obedience to his commandments, 'walking the way of the Lord' as the Old Testament puts it. This means that it is vital that God's people should know what he requires of his people, obey it, and teach others to do likewise. To this end there needs to be agreement concerning Christian ethics. Furthermore... in the case of disagreement about sexual ethics the disagreement is about matters that go to the heart of people's relationship with God, and which cannot therefore be treated as subjects on which we can simply learn to live with diversity. (p.310f.)

- **Concerns**

The weakest chapter is chapter 8. The authors explore the contentious part of the 1991 document which has been perceived, by some, to advocate a double standard for clergy and laity. The reasoning given for higher standards for clergy is to avoid the appearance of scandal (p.268). This does not seem to include the disciplining of clergy and laity who persist in unrepentant homosexual practice. Nor does it indicate an expectation that clergy who teach contrary to the Bible will be rebuked. It is considered that, all-too-often, the first word the homosexual hears is one of moral rebuke (p.265). This should certainly never be the first word they hear. However, the report seems reluctant to see Church discipline as an essential part of the health and welfare of the Church. It is concerning that the report hints at the possibility of future legitimisation, even if the conclusions are pretty conservative. The church still does not deem it appropriate to write a document discussing paedophilia or bestiality.

Conclusion to “listening to the Church”

The authors of *Some Issues* conclude that the traditional understanding of monogamous, faithful, heterosexual marriage, once re-examined, is found to be sound. We must hear this message and not assume that we are free to ignore it, nor assume that we can await further developments which will undo these clear conclusions.

Whilst the Pastoral Epistles expect exemplary behaviour of the Churches leaders this does not assume a lesser standard for lay people. The coherent biblical condemnation of homosexuality applies to lay and ordained.

We also note that, in line with 1 Tim 3, it is what clergy *teach* that is so important and the real ground for discipline. Seeking to attain promises about clergy behaviour is difficult and causes worrying about prying into private homes. However, the Church has a responsibility to call its clergy to account if they fail to teach the mind of God as revealed in the Bible and as affirmed in the official documents of the Church of England.

3. LISTENING TO THE CULTURAL MOOD

This section seeks to acknowledge some of the recent developments in the discussion since the listening process has started and to put these discussions in the context of the Church’s teaching on marriage.

- ***Civil partnership & “Gay marriage”***

The definition of marriage recognised by English law is has been strongly influenced by

- The Church’s Book of Common Prayer:

DEARLY beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and

beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honourable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace.

- and by Canon B30, (which was approved by Parliament and received the Royal Assent on 5 May 1969 and thus became part of the Statute Law of England), of Holy Matrimony, which states that: *'The Church of England affirms, according to our Lord's teaching, that marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better or worse, till death do us part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help, and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.'*

- ***Equal rights for Gays are assumed to be analogous to the civil rights movement of the 1960s***

- "Trying to draw the parallel between the proposed same-sex marriage and inter-racial marriage ignores the fact that there is more than one paradigm of equality. For me, racial equality rests on the doctrine that there is only one race – the human race – and any difference of treatment on ethnic grounds is therefore unjustifiable. But in the long history of feminism, for example, we find another view based on the complementarity of men and women. In short, should there be equality between the sexes because a woman can do anything a man can do, or because a good society needs the different perspectives of women and men equally?" (see ++ Sentamu article)

- ***Cure, reparation etc***

There is a range of views surrounding whether homosexual orientation can be changed.

Reparation

- Mario Bergner has written movingly about his change from practicing homosexuality to marriage. He was one of the 200 homosexuals interviewed in the Splitzer trial (which Splitzer recently distanced himself from see

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/19/psychiatrist-admits-gay-cure-study-flawed>)

- o Mike Davidson of CORE issues believes that change is possible for men and women struggling with same-sex attraction <http://learning.core-issues.org/>

Godly Struggle

Martin Hallett is more cautious (see *Orthos 14* below) and also the CMF article in which he concludes: “As we work at receiving God's love and forgiveness and accepting our value, some of the developmental components of our sexuality may be changed, but this will not necessarily happen. However we should know love, purpose, direction and meaning in our lives through our Lord Jesus Christ and his people. This is growth and healing for all of us and our sexuality. I wish I could say that it is easy and that I have fully experienced this ideal. Maybe not, but I continue to persevere towards that goal with the help of Jesus.”

Thomas Schmidt in *Straight and Narrow?* quotes instances of changes in homosexual desires which suggest a rate of change similar to alcohol or drug dependency rates.

Conclusion to “listening to the cultural mood”

In recent years the discussion has moved from “Civil Partnerships” to “Gay Marriage”. The Church needs to respond to the consistent lobbying from interest groups who will not rest until they see full equality and identity of Lesbians and Gays in every area of society.

Christians will want to respond by saying that the definition of marriage is not a mere social construct. Moreover - though this is complex and open to debate - sexual orientation and attraction is not necessarily fixed and may be changed through therapy and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever the conclusion of the reparation/cure discussion, the Church has traditionally taught that God calls upon all human beings to recognise a good creator who has made us in his image, and is able to assist all to live godly lives despite our fallen disposition.

4. CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LISTEN?

Listening is important, as helpfully exemplified in recent House of Bishops documents. However the authors of *Some Issues* conclude that the Church of England's traditional understanding of monogamous, faithful, heterosexual marriage, once re-examined, is found to be sound.

As Canon A5 clearly states, listening to the voice of Scripture is primary. We must hear this message and not assume that we are free to ignore it, nor assume that we can await further developments which will undo these clear conclusions.

Listening should be a continuous loving activity for all Christians all the time. However a formal listening process which seeks to undermine the declarations of Church teaching is flawed. There seems to be an

assumption that if we listen to contrary voices for long enough the faithful reading of the Bible and the eloquent witness to that teaching through the Church's teaching will be undone. We believe that this process should now cease in favour of a reaffirmation of the biblical and church teaching on these matters.

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