

Two Perspectives

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From a Conservative Perspective

We live in a society which is changing rapidly. Against this background Christians are seeking to discover how they ought to live; to bear their witness in their own generation, whilst remaining true to their faith. Nowhere is this tension felt more strongly than in the realm of human relationships, and particularly sexual ethics. In a world where so many things which would have been dismissed as unacceptable for Christians in our parent's generation are readily accepted as normal behaviour, how ought a Christian to live to remain true to themselves and to the Lord?

One of the dangers, as we seek the way forward, is that we fail to hear or understand how those who see things differently from ourselves have come to their conclusions. The following observations are offered in a spirit of humility in the hope that they might further the debate by enabling us all to see how and why conservative Christians feel as they do. And they are offered with a willingness to hear others who see things differently, but with an equal expectation that we too will be heard.

Scripture

Conservative Christians, and particularly Conservative Evangelical Christians, have a predisposition to accept the authority of Scripture. When faced with moral questions, the Bible is the first place they look for guidance. Where the Bible gives no specific teaching, they would seek to follow Biblical principles. These would be based on an understanding that it is inappropriate to lift texts out of context, to see one passage of Scripture in isolation, or to apply Biblical teaching across cultural boundaries without any reference to the cultural setting in which the Bible was written, or to whom the passage of Scripture was first directed.

In those instances where there is clear Biblical teaching the situation is somewhat easier. Of course, every passage needs to be understood in its cultural context, but once it becomes clear what the Biblical text means it is simply a matter of living in obedience to it. Conservative evangelicals would not feel that they are at liberty simply to dismiss the clear teaching of Scripture on the grounds of expediency.

Notwithstanding what has already been said, the interpretation and application of scripture remains a vexed question. It is clearly understood that we invest some texts with more authority than others. We consider some things to be binding on all Christians, whilst we acknowledge that other injunctions apply only to some who lived either in a different world or under a different authority to ourselves. We agree that murder is a sin, but we readily eat pork; both of which are condemned in scripture.

The question of whether homosexual practice is acceptable Christian conduct is, therefore, very significant. It is not just about the way individual people may choose to live their lives, but about whether the clear teaching of Scripture is authoritative for Christians in the 21st century.

Albert Outler's analysis, the so called 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' (Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience) is widely accepted as the way Methodist people understand their theology, yet as Wesleyans we acknowledge Scripture to be of supreme authority; the position which is clearly stated in our Deed of Union. The four elements mentioned above are not like legs on a table, each one of equal value, but rather Scripture is central, and we understand it in the light of our tradition, our reason, and our experience; a thought to which we will return later.

There are comparatively few references to homosexuality within the Scriptures, but if we apply the same rules of exegesis to these passages which we also apply to every other passage of Scripture, we are driven to the inescapable conclusion that the Bible condemns it. When the text is taken at face value and treated in the same way as any other scriptural passage it simply will not allow the inferences which permissive scholars wish to draw.

Most Christians set greater store by the New Testament than the Old; after all, the Old Testament prohibits all sorts of things. Yet on this issue the clear teaching of the New Testament endorses the Old. Paul in Romans 1 is very clear. Indeed he not only sees homosexual practice as evidence of the fallenness of human nature and the universality of sin, but he speaks of God as "handing over" those who wilfully engage in such practices. This may be very difficult for us to take, but it is in the New Testament, and it is not enough for us simply to say that we don't accept it because we don't like it.

We are often reminded that Jesus makes no reference to homosexual practice, and the erroneous conclusion is sometimes drawn that because He did not condemn it He must have approved of it. In fact, the opposite is the case. We can safely conclude that where Jesus was at variance with the widely accepted Jewish position on an issue He challenged it, e.g. Sabbath observance. The widely prevailing religious and cultural view on homosexual practice current in the time of Jesus was that it was unacceptable conduct. Jesus did not challenge this view. Indeed he endorses the prevailing view of sexual relationships by repeating the Old Testament counsel concerning marriage. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife" (Matthew 19: 5). Would one not have expected that if the homosexual community of Jesus' generation were a misunderstood despised minority Jesus would have championed their cause as He did with so many others who found themselves on the margins of society?

What Jesus did, however, was in this, and all issues, to offer hope for the sinner. The adulterous lifestyle of the woman brought before Him was not endorsed. It was condemned. Yet she was offered the hope of a new beginning through forgiveness. If we are to be true to the Biblical revelation, and to the teaching of Jesus, we cannot say something is not sin if the Bible teaches it clearly to be so. And we cannot stop short of offering the radical change which the love of Christ makes possible in every human life.

Similarly the traditional position on this issue is often criticised on the grounds that those who hold it are being inconsistent, since they agree to the Ordination of women. Further, it is suggested that just as the Ordination of women took a long time in coming, especially within the Church of England, and is still awaited in the Roman Catholic Church. What those who make this suggestion fail to understand is the distinction made in Scripture, and held by evangelicals, between the moral teaching of Scripture and that which concerns Church order and government. This is a distinction which evangelicals have always maintained, and which Wesley himself espoused, in the same way as he made a distinction between the dominical means of grace and the prudential means of grace. The former we would recognise as being binding on all Christians whilst the latter are simply a matter of expediency. Consequently, Wesley, who held the authority of Scripture with unshakable firmness,

did not feel it necessary to adopt a threefold order of ministry for the Methodist people. Those issues, of which there are many, which the New Testament addresses that concern our personal or social morality, are distinctively different from those of ecclesiastical propriety, and are binding on all Christians. We simply do not have an option to pick and choose.

The suggestion is sometimes made that, like slavery, it is only a matter of time before Christians recognise the validity of homosexual practice as they recognised that slavery was wrong. We therefore need to point out that whilst in the Old Testament slavery is not prohibited, the conditions under which slaves are kept, and the treatment they are to be given, is clearly laid down. Indeed, at the Year of Jubilee, there is provision for the liberation of some, whilst others who through poverty have sold themselves into slavery are liberated every seventh year. The New Testament was written in a period when slavery was a social and economic reality. The economy of the Roman Empire depended upon it. Jesus ministered to people where they were in the real world, including those who were the slaves or bondservants of others. The teachings of St. Paul are also focussed on Christians coping with real issues which they had to face. Consequently, he was not revolutionary as that word is often used today. Indeed he encourages Onesimus to return to his master Philemon. However, Paul understands that the Christian Gospel establishes a new level of relationship. Within the Christian family the distinctions of the world have no place. The ranking which society places on men and women, slaves and free, or one race against another are of no consequence whatsoever within the Christian family. The Christian lives with a value system that transcends the strictures which society imposes. It is therefore fallacious to argue that Scripture endorses slavery and the Church woke up to the fact that despite this endorsement, slavery was wrong. In fact, Scripture does not endorse slavery. It encourages Christians to live out their discipleship in a world where slavery had a place alongside many other social evils.

In passing, it is worth noting that the argument is sometimes offered that since Jesus did not condemn homosexual practice, he must have endorsed it. We see how fallacious this is when we recognise that Jesus did not condemn slavery either, but we would not dream of arguing that he endorsed it.

Wider Considerations

Whilst Scripture plays a dominant role in discerning the will of God, we recognize that reason, tradition and experience all have an additional part to play. One might even venture to suggest that the way we understand scripture ought to be more closely examined should we find ourselves in a situation where reason, tradition and experience point in another direction. This is clearly not the case here.

Our **reason** convinces us that the human body was not made for same-sex relationships. Male and female were made to complement one another in the Divine order of things. This lies at the heart of Paul's condemnation of homosexual practice in Romans I as "unnatural". One often hears the argument today that what is natural for one is not natural for another. Yet this places the choice of the individual at the centre of the debate in a very dangerous way. We would not apply the same criteria to others who claimed a legitimacy for their conduct on the grounds that it was natural to them. To quote John Stott "we have no liberty to interpret the noun 'nature' as meaning 'my' nature, or the adjective 'natural' as meaning 'what seems natural to me'. On the contrary, *physis* ('natural') means God's created order. To act 'against nature' means to violate the order which God has established, whereas to act 'according to nature' means to behave in accordance with the intention of the Creator".

The **tradition** of the Church for twenty centuries is undeniably against homosexual practice. Critics of this view may cite obscure examples of Christians belonging to a former generation who came to a different conclusion. Yet they were obscure. They never carried the mind of the Church. We need to think very seriously before we deliberately contradict the wisdom of centuries. Further, the

agreed judgment of every major world denomination today is that homosexual practice is unacceptable Christian conduct. The balance of numbers and wisdom has shifted in our own generation from the West to Africa and Asia, Latin America and the Far East. The struggles which our sisters and brethren have undergone for the gospel demand that their words are taken seriously. They are united in their condemnation. We have no right as white western Christians to view them with a patronizing attitude which metaphorically pats them on the head and tells them to catch up. That has more to do with Imperialism than the Gospel. Who do we think we are to treat their view with patronizing contempt when their churches are growing at a rapid rate and ours are nearing extinction? It just doesn't add up.

Further, we must avoid at all costs the false argument that in order to reach more people we must modify our views so that they more closely resemble those of the society we are trying to reach. All the evidence points to the contrary. The churches which are growing are those that proclaim a gospel that makes demands, does not settle for the easy option and calls us to live out the New Testament gospel in doctrine and life-style.

For many **experience** is the most difficult area in our consideration. It is comparatively easy to take a strong line on this and many other issues when considered from a just an academic or theological point of view; but when one meets someone who is in a loving, committed same-sex relationship and discovers that they are quite nice people, seeking to live out their faith as they understand it and being used by God in the mission of the church things can look very different. In this situation the Christian who takes a conservative position on this question find themselves facing a dilemma. How can they reconcile what they believe to be the clear teaching of scripture with the reality of life as they are experiencing it? There is no easy answer to this question; which is precisely why the church finds itself spending so much time and energy wrestling with the issue. But it is only through listening carefully to each other, taking each other seriously and walking close enough to God to hear the whisper of His voice that we can hope to discover a way forward.

A Progressive Perspective

Labels are always difficult, yet they can help us to name and describe things in order to talk about them. I have chosen the term 'Progressive' to describe my own position in terms of faith and theology because it implies a desire for movement. It is not intended to suggest that those who do not hold my position are backward or stagnant, but that many of them would want the Church to retain the current status quo rather than change the position. I recognise that there are others in the Church and beyond who describe themselves as 'Liberals', 'Radicals' or 'Middle of the Road' and hold many of the same positions as me, but, for me, all of those other labels have baggage.

I also write from the perspective of an openly gay Christian and ordained Presbyterian in the Methodist Church. I don't thereby represent every LGBTI Methodist! But I can say that my faith and beliefs are affected deeply by my experience as a gay Christian and by the acceptance and rejection I have received at the hands of other Methodists. I also write out of my experience of deep joy at the fellowship and friendship I have shared with those with whom I profoundly disagree. Whilst it has sometimes been a personally painful journey, nevertheless, that fellowship has allowed me to believe that true Christian fellowship is based, not on agreement, but on a willingness to learn from those who are different.

Scripture

There is a caricature in the Church that Conservative Christians believe the Bible and Progressives believe whatever they want! Sadly, some Progressive Christians seem to go out of their way to prove this maxim. However, many more, I believe, are perfectly happy to affirm that the Bible remains the primary resource for all Christians if they wish to lead lives of true and authentic discipleship. There is also a need to recognise (and repent of) those times now and in the past when the Bible has been used to abuse individuals and groups.

The fact that the Bible can be used in this way does reveal its complexity as a set of documents written in a different age and culture. The job of interpretation is one that needs to be undertaken by Christians together, carefully and humbly, recognising that we may never arrive at a definitive answer or meaning. However difficult this is, Progressive Christians would not feel that they are at liberty simply to dismiss the teaching of Scripture on the grounds of expediency.

The question of whether loving same-sex relationships are acceptable Christian conduct is, therefore, very significant. It is not just about the way individual people may choose to live their lives, but about whether we can discern the teaching of Scripture on this matter and how to apply it as Christians in the 21st century.

Whilst I would accept Albert Outler's analysis, the so called 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' (Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience), I would assert that if we are Wesleyan we acknowledge Scripture to be of supreme authority; the position which is clearly stated in our Deed of Union. The four elements mentioned above are not like legs on a table, each one of equal value, but rather Scripture is central, and we understand it in the light of our tradition, our reason, and our experience; a thought to which we will return later.

The major question for me is whether loving same-sex relationships were known in the Biblical world and, if so, whether those relationships are condemned in Scripture. I have come to the conclusion that the Bible is far from clear on the matter of loving same-sex relationships and there has been considerable eisegesis (that is, reading into the text our own prejudices) from Church authorities seeking to justify a position. One example of this is the use of the term 'practicing homosexual' in one recent Catholic translation of the New Testament Greek word, *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor 6:9). Not only is this anachronistic (the term homosexual was invented in the 19th century by

psychologists) but the distinction between orientation and practice would have been unknown to the Biblical writers.

I take it as read that the idea of loving same-sex relationships based on mutuality was unknown in the Biblical world (equality and mutuality in opposite sex marriage was also unknown!) We have to look at the cultural mores of the times and see that expressions of same-sex attraction were, for the most part, abusive and exploitative, involving children, slaves or temple prostitutes. Many men in the Greek and Roman world engaged in sex with younger men as a rite of passage or for fun but still married women. Of the relatively few Scriptural references to any same-sex activity, I am persuaded by scholars who accept that the sin of Sodom was a lack of hospitality (Gen 19; Ezek 16:49-50). I also believe that the Levitical code is problematic in terms of whom it applies to and whether we, as Christians, must accept all its injunctions (Lev 20:13; Lev 19:19). To admit these things is not an attempt to deny the Bible but rather to take it seriously.

For Progressive and LGBTI Christians, Romans 1 is the most problematic text. It points to same-sex activity as evidence of the fallenness of human nature and the universality of sin. However, again, it is important to read what Paul is trying to say carefully. Paul starts from the assumption that heterosexuality is 'natural' for all people and that engaging in same-sex sexual relations is therefore 'unnatural' for all people.

For Progressive Christians, the understandings of sexual orientation we have gleaned from medical and psychological research in the last century lead us to question that assumption. So we return to the Romans text and ask: is Paul condemning sex between people of the same gender, or is he suggesting that sin corrupts the natural order of things?

I would want to argue that Methodist theology rejects the argument from nature as flawed. From this position it has been argued that women are subservient because they are naturally 'weaker' or that they must stay at home parents because of child-bearing. This has been shown to be an unacceptable approach and revelation shows nature to remain flawed and fallen.

We are often reminded that Jesus makes no reference to same-sex relationships, and the conclusion is sometimes drawn that because he did not condemn it, he must have approved of it. I agree that we cannot use the argument from silence though I would argue that Jesus went out of his way to engage with people in relationships considered odd or even sinful at the time – adulterers, prostitutes, women-headed households. And, of course, the best way to endorse opposite-sex marriage would have been to marry yet Jesus seems to have remained single. So we must look to the principles and practices of Jesus recorded in the Gospels to discern how we are to act today.

It is important to remember that our understanding of Scripture and how we should live in response to its teaching has evolved over the centuries. It is hard to imagine now, but issues such as celibacy and pacifism were considered the highest or only position to be taken by the early Christian community. For seventeen centuries, Christians did not see the keeping of human beings as slaves as against the teaching of Christ. As we struggle to come to terms in the Church with the legacy of sexism, racism, anti-Semitism and colonialism, we must acknowledge that they were built on Scriptural foundations. Yet, it was also fresh readings of Scripture by Christian leaders like John Wesley and William Wilberforce that led to a reversal in Christian norms and behaviour. The power of Scripture is its diversity of voices and Progressive Christians have benefitted greatly from liberationist readings emerging from the Two-Thirds World Church who have told us to search for the voices of the powerless in the text. So we find ourselves engaging with a living document which challenges itself, with grand themes and simple stories. But what is it saying to us now?

Wider Considerations

Whilst Scripture plays a dominant role in discerning the will of God, we recognize that reason, tradition and experience all have an additional part to play. One might even venture to suggest that the way we understand scripture ought to be more closely examined should we find ourselves in a situation where reason, tradition and experience point in another direction.

Our **reason** now tells us that same-sex attraction is a reality and occurs in every human society. There is no consensus about how it happens, only that the individual has little control over it. No major denomination believes that being LGBTI is a sin. Many now point to a distinction between orientation and practice, suggesting even that this is what Scripture endorses. There is no reference to this in the Bible and most psychologists now believe that this distinction is problematic for mental and physical health. Until the 1970s, homosexuality was defined as a mental illness by the medical community. We have to admit that that our thinking has changed in wider society and this has affected our previous readings of Scripture.

The **tradition** of the Church for twenty centuries is generally been deeply hostile to same-sex relationships and LGBTI individuals. This has been expressed in violence with gay men being used as fuel to burn heretics (the term ‘faggot’ comes from the practice of using gay men rather than wood faggots to burn people at the stake). That hostility and, sometimes, brutal violence still affects many LGBTI Christians today. There have been instances in the history of the Church where same-sex relations have not been treated in this way, but these have often been suppressed in the same way as examples of women’s leadership. No Christian leader has offered any apology for the brutality meted out to LGBTI Christians now or in the past.

It is certainly true that every major world denomination today still holds that homosexual practice is unacceptable Christian conduct. However, it is not true that all Churches hold to this line. Across the world, different Methodist Churches have come to different conclusions about the nature and acceptability of same-sex relationships. Not all cultures condemn same-sex relationships and there are cultural practices of polygamy and polyandry which the local Church has had to engage with. It reminds those Western Christians seeking to impose a universal cultural and Christian norm that marriage practices are culturally determined. In most of the British Commonwealth, condemnation of homosexuality came as imperial law not local custom. We must own homophobia as an imperial export and imposition if we are to try to understand the complex voices coming from the World Methodist family. The struggle to discern the mind of Christ and the prompting of the Spirit is long and challenging.

Experience is the most challenging area in our consideration. It is absolutely right for Christians to want to respond pastorally when moved by the story of a gay Christian telling of her hurt and rejection in the Church. This is where the rubber hit the road, where our theology and belief is tested and practiced. However, it is important to reiterate that Progressive Christians do not wish to abandon faith or belief in this response, nor do we think that a pastoral response is just ‘being nice’.

I agree that experience cannot trump everything else. But this is not just about some of us telling our stories about being gay and Christian. It is also the experience of vicious and violent homophobia meted out by other Christians and what that says about the validity of their position. There has not been, as far as I am aware, any corporate apology for the violence done in the name of Christ. If we are to engage in questions about acceptable Christian behaviour, then that must include the hostility, and the emotional and physical violence that some Christians feel an appropriate response to LGBTI people.

For many of us, we have come to see that sexuality is a vocation given by God who has built all human beings for relationship. LGBTI Christians must struggle with what that means for sexual relationships, given the huge burden of Church tradition and current attitudes. But some of us have come to the realization that entering into a loving, caring, mutual relationship with another is life-giving, affirming and grace-filled. It is not about the mechanics of sex but about the experience of self-giving love that allows us to glimpse afresh the love of Christ.

The current situation

For more than a generation the Methodist Church in Great Britain has been debating human sexuality with particular reference to same-sex relationships. Previous resolutions of the Conference spoke of a 'Pilgrimage of Faith' in which we travelled together, heard one another clearly, listened carefully and together sought to discern the will of God for the next step. Some have felt that this journey has been too slow; but they have usually been those who had a clearer idea than anyone else about where it should be leading! Our progress may have been slow, but we have remained together and remain committed to take the next step only when we are sure that we are walking in the will of God.

The current issue before us is whether we should consider revising our definition of marriage as it is enshrined in our Standing Orders (S.O. 011A). Note, it is not whether we should revise the Standing Order, but whether we should consider doing so.

The church remains divided on this issue, and so as we seek to discern the way forward it is very important that the Methodist people are consulted as widely as possible, that each one argues their case as strongly as they can, and that we all listen carefully to the wisdom which others have to share.

There was a time, in living memory, when the position which one held on same-sex relationships depended on the theology which one embraced. Conservative Evangelicals could all be said to occupy a conservative position on this question and Liberals the opposite. Such is the case no longer. There have been a number of high-profile cases of evangelical leaders whose position has been modified; a situation which has sometimes brought them into conflict with their constituency. On the other hand, but less well publicised, there have been those who have embraced a more liberal position on this issue, and who have been in a practicing same-sex relationship who have changed their behaviour as a result of a new inner conviction. All this demonstrates how difficult is the journey we travel, but inspires a new conviction that we are called to travel it together.

We need to face the fact that, at this stage of our journey, it is most unlikely that everyone will agree with everything. So what are the alternatives? Either, on the one hand those who take a conservative view hope that they will be enabled to persuade enough people so that they win the vote, and they then hope that those who disagree will go away. Or, on the other hand, those who take a progressive view hope that they will persuade enough, win the vote and that the conservatives will go away.

But those on each side of the debate are not going to go anywhere. We are all committed to stay within the Methodist Church. So we must find a way of continuing to travel together as together we seek God's will. This will mean that we must continue to respect the conscience of each Methodist, that no one is required to act in a way that contradicts their conscience and that we seek to safeguard the unity of the church at every level. It will mean sharing sincerely, listening carefully and acting honestly. It will mean demonstrating to the world as well as to ourselves that we are a family, held together by the love of God. As followers of John Wesley we will seek to be "the friends of all and the enemies of none".