

Same Sex Relationship Issues and the Church

Part 2: Medical/Scientific and Ethical Issues (presented on 21/8/13)

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Psychological/medical perspectives

Last week, Keir Howard presented a survey of Biblical passages that relate to same-sex activities. He found that there were relatively few references to homosexual behaviour in the Bible but that they were uniformly negative. Now we move on to the present day. How does modern medical science and psychology see homosexual behaviour? Unfortunately it is not easy to answer that simply, because there are widely differing views even among experts in medicine and psychology. For example, some in recent decades have argued that the origin of homosexuality is genetic and biological, but the quality of the research that formed that view now seems to be widely rejected. It is now more common for the experts to view homosexuality as the result of a complex mix of developmental factors. If I understand correctly, psychologists view human sexuality as a spectrum in which by far the most common orientation is heterosexual, but which involves other sexual orientations and behaviours, such as gay, lesbian and bi-sexual.

According to the most widely accepted study of sexual practices in the United States – the National Health and Social Life Survey completed in 1994, 2.8 percent of male Americans and 1.4 percent of female Americans identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual. I don't have any figures relating to New Zealand, but I would suggest that a reasonably similar percentage is the case here. This means that the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (gltb) community is a relatively small but significant percentage of the populace.

Whatever the origin of homosexuality, many of those who identify as homosexuals – though by no means all – have their sexual identity firmly established from an early age, and do not feel any desire or ability to change that. People's sexual orientation and attractions may vary during their lifetime, so we should not think of sexual orientation as a completely fixed factor in adults. But in practice, many homosexuals find that their homosexual orientation is established early on and remains relatively firmly settled throughout their life. This is an important point to establish, because it means that it is unrealistic and therefore unreasonable to expect homosexuals to change and become heterosexual.

Ethical perspectives

This points us immediately to issues of ethics. If homosexual behaviour is part of a spectrum of human sexual behaviour, can it be held to be wrong between two consenting adults? If two adults who love one another want to live together in all degrees of intimacy, what basis could we have for denying them that desire?

Our society has determined that homosexual practice is not wrong, and has legislated to ban all discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or homosexual practice. Of course, the Church is distinct from society in general, and has its own approach to the issue. The Anglican approach is governed by the teaching of the Bible, and reflection on that teaching in the light of Christian tradition, human reason and human experience. The Church is the group of people who commit themselves to follow the way of Christ. All those who live in the country are part of society, but only those who choose to be so are part of the Church. So those who legislate for society have a responsibility not to reflect any particular set of values, such as the values of the Christian Church, as if they were everyone's values.

But the Church has its own distinct set of values, and seeks to be faithful to God and God's teaching, supremely revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ. So our challenge and responsibility as a Christian Church is not necessarily to reflect the views of our society. (Nor should we unthinkingly reflect the views of our tradition either, of course – especially where greater understanding of homosexuality has indicated that it is part of the broad spectrum of human sexuality). Our challenge and responsibility as we seek to address these issues of same sex relationships in the Church, is to respond in a way that is faithful to God. “What would be most faithful to God in this situation?” is the question that I would pose. But even that question is slippery to answer, because we will all construct faithfulness somewhat differently in our own minds.

One version of faithfulness would be to respond in a way that follows Jesus's two greatest commandments, loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves. A second version of faithfulness might be to adhere to Biblical teaching on the topic. A third would be to act justly, especially towards those who are oppressed and marginalised in our society.

Let us briefly consider each of these paradigms in turn. Firstly, the commandment to love. We know that love of another person includes accepting that person and allowing them to accept themselves in all their humanness, as ordinary fallible, sinful people. It hardly needs to be said that we all get things wrong at times, and that we all need acceptance from God and from others, whether we are straight or gay. We need to be allowed to be ourselves and acceptance was Jesus's consistent practice. Of course, where we are clear that people are doing damage to themselves or others, or at risk of doing so, we may well, in love, offer a warning or seek to intervene. For example, someone might take a drunk person's car keys away from them out of concern for them and for others. But are we so convinced that there is harm in committed gay relationships that we would actively intervene or seek to call that behaviour into question? What clear evidence do we have of that harm? We are very prone to want to control people's behaviour, but this is often not for their benefit but in order to make ourselves feel more comfortable.

If I may tell a personal story, I can remember a situation where someone came to me for spiritual direction and one part of his life seemed to me out of line for a follower of Jesus. In a non-judgmental way we talked about this area of his life, and it didn't change. After reflecting on this and struggling with it for quite some time, I came to realise that if God was at work in this person's life, as was undoubtedly the case, and if this person was open to God's leading, as was also definitely the case, then I could allow God to set priorities for this person's discipleship, rather than setting them myself. I might have been uncomfortable about an aspect of his life, but if anyone should know all about me, I dare say that there would be parts of my life that would seem out of order too, (and maybe God will one day help me deal with them). I am not saying here that sexual behaviour within a committed same-sex relationship is necessarily wrong, but even if it were wrong before God, perhaps it would be better to allow Christian people to find their own way along their path under God's guidance, rather than for others to impose their views on those people. In my experience, love tends to lead us to humility and respect before a person, rather than towards an attempt to control them.

Of course, one might argue that love of God and of others requires us to take seriously the specific statements in the Bible relating to homosexuality – and here we enter into the second paradigm I mentioned before, the paradigm of faithfulness to the Scriptures. In the Bible we find that Jesus was capable not just of accepting others, but also of pointing them to a better way. For example, he said to the woman caught in adultery not only, "Neither do I condemn you," but also "Go and sin no more." And yet, if we are heterosexual, we need to be very careful that any reaction against homosexual behaviour that we might feel doesn't lead us to make especially firm rules for homosexual behaviour that we don't apply in other areas. For instance, in the Old Testament there are repeated prohibitions on usury, the lending out of money at interest. But Duleep de Chickera, a Sri Lankan Christian, draws attention to the fact that in our very different socio-economic context, the Church does not see any problem with this activity, as long as the lending is at normal commercial rates. Why is it that we have one set of rules for usury and a different set of rules for homosexual practice when both are condemned in the Bible?

The third paradigm I want to consider is the paradigm of justice. What would be a just way of dealing with this matter as Christian people? We have to acknowledge that there has been a lot of injustice in the way that the Church has treated gay and lesbian people in the past. Sometimes this has gone as far as violence and murder. Even today in some parts of the world, the Church is implicated in the marginalisation and abuse of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Fortunately, there is no suggestion in our discussion that the Church should treat members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community with anything other than respect and a welcome. The questions we are addressing as a Church are whether the Church should bless same sex unions and ordain clergy in committed same sex relationships. In other words, the Church is asking itself whether the lifestyle of people in committed same-sex relationships is so far from God's will as to be incompatible with God's blessing and Christian leadership.

We could easily argue that injustice is occurring when the majority who are straight, emphasise homosexual acts (a behaviour of the minority) as 'abominable behaviour'. Can this behaviour be justly considered in isolation as abominable, when many of the people who engage in it display the fruits of the Spirit of God – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and so on? Indeed, down through the ages many clergy have been gay. And some clergy today are gay. Can we really with justice argue that homosexuality is the defining factor between those who can be ordained or not? Don't all ordinands and ordained people have areas of their lives that could be called into question by others – an orientation towards materialism, for instance? Straight people also have their own share of sin. It could be argued that those of us who are straight need to get the plank out of our own eyes before we judge the actions of others as wrong.

And lastly, is it just that the heterosexual majority in the Anglican Church require of homosexuals in Christian leadership a standard of sexual abstinence that they do not require of themselves?

In conclusion, when we take a contemporary view of same-sex issues, many ethical questions arise for us, and I have barely scraped the surface of them. In response to these questions we are called as Christians to be faithful to God and open to God's word to us. This means that we should also let the Bible critique our current perspectives on life. For example, our society considers self-actualisation and self-fulfilment top priorities. But these are not identifiably Christian priorities. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. In doing that, Jesus is actually asking us to forsake those things that we would like to do but which don't honour him. Could homosexual behaviour be one of those things?

As you can hear from this engagement with some of the ethical issues raised, I find it very easy to see how people of deep Christian faith and commitment could find themselves on either side of this issue. In fact, although good reasoning is very important, it seems to me that more than just reasoning is needed here. We need prayer, humility, good listening and deep spiritual discernment as we make this journey with one another over the next few years and beyond.

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