

Reflections on the Bishops' letter to the Coordinating Group for *Living in Love and Faith*.

David Atkinson October 2018

I have been invited to comment on the letter from 11 evangelical bishops, some of them friends or former colleagues, to the Bishop of Coventry as Chair of the Coordinating Group for *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF). The letter was sponsored by the Church of England Evangelical Council, and seeks to underline the importance for LLF's work ('Human Identity, Sexuality and Marriage') of affirming the central place of Scripture, and supremely Christ's teaching, in Christian mission and discipleship for a Church which seeks to embody Christ's Gospel. Their approach, they argue, must affirm that 'we are made in God's image, have fallen captive to sin, are redeemed by Christ, and are being sanctified by the Spirit.' All that I gladly affirm.

The writers recognize that LLF is dealing with a 'complex and contested' issue; they say they wish to be open to fresh understanding of Scripture as led by God's Spirit; they recognize that Christian teaching changes and develops, and that the Church must always be reformed according to the Word of God. They affirm the traditional teaching of 'faithfulness and chastity both within and outside marriage.' All this I also affirm.

However, when the bishops identify the wording of Canon Law and various Resolutions about heterosexual marriage with 'the teaching of Scripture', and that they therefore express 'the character and will of God', I believe they being too bold. I accept that whenever Scripture refers to same sex relationships it does so negatively. However I cannot accept the Levitical laws with their associated death penalty as a clear guide for Christian discipleship. I am inclined to believe that St Paul's references are most likely to be to the idolatrous promiscuity of the Gentile world of his day. I have written much more fully about these references in my chapter in Terry Brown ed. *Other Voices, Other Worlds*. My question to my episcopal colleagues is this: are you open to the possibility that there could be more than one faithful interpretation of Scripture on these matters? Some of your evangelical colleagues believe so.

Christian understanding of the 'Scriptural teaching' on marriage and sexuality has developed from Augustine, Aquinas and Cranmer, and within Anglican theology in recent decades, not least post-Freud. The evangelical tutor David Runcorn is one of many who have come to 'accept the place of committed, faithful, same-sex relationships within the Church on the basis of (not in spite of) the teaching of

Scripture' (see his essay in the *Pilling Report*). Such evangelicals believe that to speak about 'the teaching of Scripture' on marriage and sexuality narrows down the very questions that are acknowledged to be 'complex and contested'. I believe we need to stand back from other dimensions of the 'teaching of Christ' to provide a fuller context for our current understanding. When Jesus pronounces a blessing on the 'pure in heart' (which I think means emotional sincerity), that is surely a blessing on Marcus Green, an evangelical vicar whose life was 'screwed up' by the church, forcing him to deny his gay identity and 'hide in plain sight' until he came to believe that he, too, was loved by God and able to be emotionally honest (see his new book *The Possibility of Difference*). When Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who 'hunger and thirst for God's justice', does that not apply on behalf of so many in our culture who have been oppressed and marginalized because of their sexual orientation? Jesus endorses the Genesis teaching about humanity in God's image, male and female, as a basis for the permanence of marriage as God's ideal, and then allows divorce in certain circumstances as the best way of making optimum moral sense of a less than ideal situation. With this in mind, some evangelicals have asked the question: how is a Christian gay person to make optimum moral sense of his or her life? Is our willingness within the Church to give each other freedom of conscience to disagree about divorce and remarriage not equally applicable to our disagreements about gay relationships? In other words, although Canon B 30 is right to say that 'according to our Lord's teaching.. marriage is in its nature a union, permanent and lifelong...of one man with one woman', 'our Lord's teaching' covers many other aspects of discipleship, relationship and vocation as well.

If it is possible for a gay couple to make an act of exclusive, loving commitment within a permanent covenanted relationship and to experience God's blessing in doing so, and find their lives displaying the fruit of God's Spirit, then I believe we need a broader evangelical theology of covenanted same-sex friendship than can be found in what the bishops refers to as 'Anglican tradition'. The evangelical scholar and liturgist, and gay evangelical Christian, Dr. Michael Vasey explored such a theology in *Strangers and Friends* as long ago as 1995. More recently theologian and ethicist Professor Robert Song opened up a fresh understanding of the fulfillment of all creation, including our identity as sexual beings, in Christ in *Covenant and Calling*.

I believe we must not give Lambeth 1.10 the status of Holy Scripture, or even the fortieth of the 39 Articles; nor assume that the legal framework of Canon B 30 is all there is to 'the teaching of our Lord.'

Indeed, we could perhaps add to Canon B 30 (taking our cue from some wording in the forgotten 1979 Gloucester Report):

‘The Church of England also recognizes that there are circumstances in which an individual may justifiably choose to enter into a covenanted partnership, permanent, exclusive and life-long, with a person of the same sex, with the hope of enjoying loving companionship similar to that which is to be found in marriage. Such a partnership is not incompatible with the doctrine of Holy Matrimony that is affirmed in Canon B 30.’

I have written elsewhere (*Other Voices, Other Worlds*) that I think Lambeth 1.10 is ‘too blunt an instrument for an appropriate pastoral response to those for whom this is a pressing personal question, too unclear an instrument for forming any constructive Christian mission to gay communities, and too insensitive an instrument for affirming and accepting what is of God in the lives of many Christian gay people.’ My prayer then was - and now is - that God will give us grace as a global church, and as evangelical brothers and sisters, to enable each other, in relation to these questions - as we continue to grow and learn - to have freedom of conscience to disagree.

END