

## **Begging to Differ** (an article in *Third Way* magazine; written December 1995)

Sixteen years ago, I was invited by Latimer House to write a monograph on homosexual people in the Christian fellowship. I produced an exercise in biblical exegesis and moral theology, most of which I still agree with. I noted various standpoints within the church, concluding then that neither the hostility of homophobia nor a simple affirmation of gay relationships as morally equivalent in every way to heterosexual ones was compatible with the traditional understanding of scripture.

I worked on the standard biblical texts that refer to homosexual behaviour. The story of Sodom seemed to me to have very little to contribute to the contemporary debates. The Levitical laws have to be handled carefully in the light of the Christian gospel, but they seem to form the basis for the New Testament understanding of homosexual behaviour as out of line with the Creator's purpose for human sexuality, as inappropriate for citizens of the kingdom of heaven and as falling short of the requirements of the Ten Commandments<sup>1</sup>. My own position was, I think, fairly conservative, but (I hope) pastorally sensitive. I believed that homosexual genital behaviour was not endorsed by any of the biblical texts usually quoted in this debate, and that a clear homosexual orientation was, for Christian people, most likely a calling to celibacy.

However, I have to come to see much more clearly than I did then that a concentration on the biblical exegesis of these texts, important though that is, does not engage with many of the other questions which contemporary expression of homosexual identity is posing for the Church. Two subsequent experiences at that time reinforced in me the growing conviction that there is something very much broader and deeper here for Christian gay people than only the question of exegesis of the standard texts and the reaffirmation of traditional morality. At a meeting with evangelical members of what was then the Gay Christian Movement, I was denounced as anti-Christ because I did not agree with their theology. My attempt to hold fast to traditional exegesis was received (and vehemently rejected) as homophobic prejudice. Then at an evangelical meeting concerned with ministry amongst 'ex-gays', I was warmly welcomed until I had the temerity to suggest that there might be a genetic predisposition in some homosexual people. Some of the other participants turned on me, accusing me of undermining their whole ministry, which held before all homosexual people both the possibility and the responsibility to change their orientation. What, I asked myself on both occasions, is really going on here?

In the Eighties, I taught at different times at two evangelical theological colleges. The day after the debate in 1987 in the Church of England's General Synod, a young, single, celibate gay clergyman came to me in tears and asked 'Am I really an abomination to God?' Though much else had been said in the debate, that is what he had heard.

Once, after I had lectured on the ethics of human sexuality, three evangelical ordinands separately confided in me that they were homosexual, though they feared lest their bishop or principal should find out. One fine student was well on the way to being accepted for ordination when he felt that he had to tell his bishop that he was gay and that, although there was no prospect of it at that time, he did not know what he would do if he met someone of the same sex with whom he wanted to share his life. His integrity and honesty put his whole calling and career in jeopardy. I asked myself: are we as a church encouraging each other to live in the light and freedom of the gospel, or are we getting in the way?

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<sup>1</sup> see respectively, Romans 1. 1Cor 6.9 and 1 Timothy 1.9ff. I am less clear now about 1 Cor 6.9, which could very well refer

In 1988, I contributed to the confidential Osborne Report, which offered the House of Bishops a largely descriptive account of the situation in the Church of England at that time. It drew on the experiences of many gay Christians, and presented various options that we thought were available to the bishops. Subsequently I have received what I can only describe as hate-mail from some evangelicals, and I was called on several times to ‘justify’ why I had let the side down by putting my name to such a ‘compromised’ document. On more than one occasion, when I asked my accuser ‘Have you read the Report?’, the answer was ‘No’. Again, I had to ask: what is really going on here?

That was the background to my change of emphasis in my book *Pastoral Ethics*<sup>2</sup>, where I tried to open up a broader perspective on the question. I discussed the importance of a biblical stance on social justice, on integrity, on the quality of Christian fellowship offered in our churches to those who feel they are on the margins and on an understanding of the varieties of human sexualities and the ways that our knowledge and acceptance of ourselves change through the journey of life and the journey of faith. Since then, I have come to question even more how far contemporary expression of homosexual love in a committed relationship corresponds at all with the patterns of behaviour rejected in Leviticus and condemned by St. Paul.

I now believe there are deep personal questions about integrity, honesty and justice which are barely being addressed by most of the evangelical community. Homosexuality is not only – or even primarily – about sexuality. It is not ‘an issue’; we are talking about people. When some Christians require others, as a test of orthodoxy, to make public statements about God’s law and to call all homosexual people to repentance, it feels like the high road to legalism. I remember one student with whom I had an extended pastoral relationship while he struggled, suicidally at times, with the misery and loneliness of his homosexual orientation and tried to make sense of his faith in relation to his sexuality. He came to me some time later, relaxed, at peace with himself and with God, open and creative, because he had met someone who loved him.

I recall other relationships which are characterized, so far as anyone outside them can observe, primarily by such things as a desire to share your life with someone else, have a friend to go to Sainsbury’s with, to go on holiday with, to be there when you are ill, to look after you when you are dying. What would be Jesus’ attitude to such relationships? Why does the church have so little that is positive to say about homosexual friendships? Why has the category of friendship almost disappeared in most things the church has to say about sex?

So where am I, 16 years on from my Latimer Study? I mostly hold to the biblical work I did then, and to the moral theology I developed then. But I would now want to put all of this in a much larger context – to say much more about social justice and the evils of discrimination against people on the grounds of their sexual orientation. I would want to say much more about what the wider church can learn about pastoral care from the way some gay people look after their friends who are dying of Aids. I would want to develop a better evangelical theology of personal and ecclesiastical integrity, so that people are not forced against their own wishes to hide a precious part of themselves for fear of prejudicing their friendships, career or ministry.

I want to try to understand what the sexual politics of the contemporary gay movement signify in terms of its noisy (too noisy, in my view) critique of social stereotypes of masculinity (which are themselves, often,

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<sup>2</sup> *Pastoral Ethics in Practice* (Monarch 1989); revised and reissued by Lynx in 1994 as *Pastoral Ethics: a Guide to the Key Issues of Daily Living*.

thoroughly unbiblical). And I want to listen much more now to the testimony of prayerful, godly, Christ-centred, gospel-motivated Christian people who do not believe that their gay orientation is for them a calling to a life of celibacy, and who can thank God for their homosexual orientation, and sometimes celebrate the gift of a partner in a stable, faithful, loving and permanent relationship.

This does not mean that I accept uncritically most of the propaganda of gay activists – either inside or outside the church. I think the church is right to struggle with the tension between our inherited tradition and the testimony of numbers of gay Christian people. As I shall try to elaborate, I do not myself believe that homosexuality is in every way morally or theologically equivalent to heterosexuality. I believe that homosexual intercourse falls short of the divine ideal for human sexuality. But I do believe that the testimony to which I refer needs to be heard.

Of course, I have no brief whatever for the promiscuity that is simply assumed in many secular gay communities. I abhor the political tactics of some gay activists. I cannot wholly endorse the theological position of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, which to my mind fails to do justice to the God-given complementarity of male and female humanity in the divine image – and which sometimes seems to be less concerned than it should be about promiscuity – though the arrival of Aids has changed that to some extent.

There are gay people I know for whom the LGCM does not speak at all. I still believe that for many such people, God's will is a life of celibacy, and I know many who in a quiet and godly way are getting on with their lives and ministries with joy. These people need to be honoured and supported on a road that our ecclesiastical climate has too often made a very lonely one. The work of True Freedom Trust is a good example of such support. There are others to whom the ministries of healing have given hope, and some who bear testimony to substantial change in their lives. I do not want to discount such pastoral work, although too often, in my experience, it seems to raise unrealistic expectations and result in burdensome disappointment. There are others still who have found that a committed, stable, faithful relationship with someone of the same sex is their way to make moral and spiritual sense of their lives.

If, instead of asking first about God's law, we ask: 'How am I to move nearer to a life of holiness?', or 'How am I going to find more integrity in my life?' and if some Christian gay people answer that question in terms of a committed relationship of love, in which they have found some steadiness in the ministry of the gospel instead of a life of anguished struggle, and some warmth and love instead of deep loneliness and isolation, what is a biblically informed response? It surely cannot be right that the first (and sometimes the only) word heard by gay people from the church is rejection, expressed in terms of law and a call to repentance. Is it not the heart of the gospel that it is only after we hear and receive the word of God's grace that the question of change even arises?

How, then, do I now understand this in terms of biblical theology? I am not entirely sure, but it might encompass the following. The Christian tradition affirms that the purposes of our sexuality include companionship, pleasure and creativity.<sup>3</sup> Humanity, made male and female in the divine image, normatively expresses these purposes of human sexuality in the complementarity of the sexes. Within this given polarity, there is a proper place for rich and fulfilling same-sex relationships of love and friendship. In heterosexual marriage, companionship, pleasure and creativity are part of the pilgrimage

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<sup>3</sup> See Genesis 2.18;2.23; 1.28a.

which can contribute (to use Jack Dominian's categories)<sup>4</sup> to the mutual healing, sustenance and growth of the partners. It is because of God's 'Yes' to these that there is traditionally a strong 'No' to (for example) divorce, adultery and promiscuity. For those who are called to celibacy, the need for companionship can be met by a wide circle of friendships, which can also provide for sexual pleasure (though not eroticized) and for creativity (though not procreativity).

The primary tension point for me is that the traditional understanding that the complementarity of the sexes in the divine image is normative<sup>5</sup> leads to the conclusion that the homosexual situation is in some sense problematic. It also suggests that the discovery that one has a homosexual orientation is best understood as a calling to celibacy. Yet I now believe that the choice to enter a stable, committed same-sex relationship which bears the fruit of love, joy, peace, faithfulness, gentleness, meekness and self-control can be understood as a responsible way to make sense of life in an imperfect situation. Indeed, in a hostile society and a hostile church, I see it as the right choice under God for some people for their healing substance and growth. Many gay Christian people, I know, would want to go much further. But I am searching for a way to understand the fulfillment of the purpose of God's law in the life of the Spirit, in a less than ideal world and within the wider, freer, healing context of grace.

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<sup>4</sup> *Marriage, Faith and Love* DLT.

<sup>5</sup> This seems to me implicit in the word of Jesus recorded in Matthew 19.4f, as well as throughout the Bible.