Can we be faithful to Scripture and affirm faithful, monogamous same-sex relationships?

There are many who believe that this cannot possibly be the case in the light of a number of specific texts in both the New and the Old Testament which appear to be conclusive.

Others argue that a careful reading of the Scriptures will lead anyone with an open mind to the conclusion that the Bible does not condemn faithful, monogamous same-sex relationships.

While so many in the Anglican Communion agree about so much and even when we disagree, we seem generally to be able to hear other people's perspectives. This is the one issue that we make into the contemporary test of orthodoxy and seem unable to make room for difference. It is an issue which "*is not in any early church statement of faith, and it is absent from the Reformers' great debates. Luther did not make any great play on this. Calvin didn't seem to care. The Westminster Shorter Catechism forgot to focus here. ... ...*" [47: p19] But this has become the touchstone in our assessment of each other.

It seems that neither side in the debate finds it easy, or even possible, to acknowledge the integrity and scriptural loyalty of the other. So, we sit at a crossroads with different parts of the church pulling in different directions, and, no doubt, many in the church looking back and forward between the two, not sure which way to turn.

"*Somewhere between the extremes of these polarized sentiments probably lie the vast majority of churchgoers, with people uncertain what to make of it all, or people opposed to a change or supportive of it, who nevertheless do not regard it as a church-breaking issue*." [48: p1]

In the light of this stalemate it seems likely, to me at least, that there will be a significant and possibly permanent split in the Anglican Communion unless things change significantly.

Duncan Dormor and Jeremy Morris comment that "*the possibility of a permanent split [hangs] over the Anglican Communion. ... These divisions are not of course confined to Anglicanism. They can be found in Methodism, in churches of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, and in Roman Catholicism. But they have perhaps never been as bitter there, or as destructive, as they have in Anglicanism. Advocates of a change in the Church's policy towards homosexuality and their opponents have traded insults and claimed the moral high ground*." [48: p1]

The Archbishop of Canterbury's speech at the Lambeth Conference 2022 included a reminder of the reality of the current situation, and the need to care for each other: "*So let us not treat each other lightly or carelessly. We are deeply divided. That will not end soon. We are called by Christ himself both to truth and unity*." [1]

In *Living in Love and Faith* the two Archbishops in the UK say that our intention needs to be that: "*We seek to understand the mind of God revealed in Scripture, our final authority in which we find all things necessary for salvation. We listen to the Church present and past and universal. We use our reason and understanding, drawing on the best thinking of the natural and human sciences. In that process of threefold listening we commit to learning, from God and through each other, in the spirit and light of that perfect love*." (87: pVII)

Over the years there have been a number of issues of this nature, matters which seemingly have strong biblical support but which the Church, or some part of the Church, has ultimately had to accept cannot continue to be considered valid. "*From the inclusion of Gentiles in the church to the abolition of*

slavery, the church has a long history of revisiting the biblical text in light of compelling evidence that prevailing interpretations do not align with Jesus' teaching." [2]

Examples of the changes which have occurred as a result of revisiting the biblical text include:

The Gentiles being welcomed into the nascent Church - *"The early Christians chose to include Gentiles in the church without requiring them to be circumcised and obey the Old Testament law—and they made this decision based on their experience. Peter had his own experience of God in Joppa which made it possible for him to attend the house of Cornelius [Acts 10] and later he declared of early Gentile believers, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us... Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?"* [Acts 15:1-19, specifically 15:8,10] [3]

"For Peter and the apostles, the admission of Gentiles to the church challenged inherited taboos and traditional readings of Scripture just as acutely as debates over gender and sexuality challenge ours." [4: p30][5] *"It is left to James to seek a revelatory framework in scripture for understanding what God is doing in the present [Acts 15.15]. The Bible is full of texts that call for a radical separation between the people of God and the 'unclean' Gentile world. But ethical dilemmas are not solved simply by adding up proof-texts or majority voting. What James does is to find a prophetic text which (with the aid of contemporary exegetical techniques, that is with the aid of reason) allows him to envisage the different future into which God is leading his people, the future Kingdom to which the story of Jesus points."* [4: p30-31]

The story which culminates in Acts 15, "points us towards a biblical hermeneutic that reads scripture as the word of the living God, a revelation whose meaning is not exhausted by its original context but must be read in dialogue with what God is doing in the present. In other words, Scripture calls us to a hermeneutic of attentiveness: of attentiveness to the revelatory action of the Spirit in the Word and in the world; of attentiveness to our dialogue partners in the dialectical processes of revelation, inside the church and out; and of attentiveness to the story of Jesus, with its disconcerting habit of subverting all our moral certainties." [4: p31]

It is this scriptural example which gives warrant to a process in which experience and reason call on us to review our understanding of the various messages of the Scriptures as we have received them.

The earth ceasing to be viewed as the centre of the universe [6] - *"Early scientists believed that what appeared to be movement around Earth by the Sun and other entities was, in fact, just that." This was also the position of the Church. Later "scientists such as Nicolaus Copernicus and Galileo correctly realized that Earth moves around the Sun, not vice versa, and thus cannot be the centre of the universe."* [7]

"*In 1543, after a decade spent fearing ridicule, a young Polish scientist named Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) decided to publish his book* ***De revolutionibus orbium coelestium****. In it he proposed that the sun was at the centre of our universe and that the Earth was one of a number of orbiting satellites — a theory at odds with Christian dogma. Copernicus died just months after his work was published. It was a pamphlet written by an astronomer named Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) that proved Copernicus' theory that was condemned by the Church as blasphemous. In 1610, Galileo (1564-1642) published Sidereus Nuncius, which described the lunar phases of the night sky as seen through the newly invented telescope. It confirmed the work of Copernicus and Brahe. Yet in 1616 his books were banned by the Catholic church under a decree of Pope Paul V that declared the idea of Earth's motion false and contrary to scripture. On the same day Copernicus' book of 1543 was also banned*. [8]

"A second judgement of heresy was passed down against Galileo in 1633, for placing the sun at the centre of the universe. This led to him being put under house arrest in the hills above Florence for the rest of his life. ... It wouldn't be until more than a century later, in 1758, that the church finally dropped its prohibition against books promoting heliocentrism — the astronomical model in which the Earth and planets revolve around the sun at the centre of the solar system." [8]

The abolition of slavery - *"In the 19th century, Christians reconsidered the longstanding interpretation of Scripture that supported slavery. William Wilberforce and many other Christian abolitionists appealed to the horrific reality of slavery to urge other Christians to change their understanding of Scripture on the topic*." [6][3]

The reality is that "*many prominent white evangelical scholars argued that slavery was biblical, and could point to a number of specific texts in support. In contrast, those opposed relied on the general trajectory of the Bible, or the spirit of scripture*." [96: p109] So, a prominent evangelical, James Thornwell, speaking in favour of the status quo said of his abolitionist opponents: "*While they admit that the letter of the Scriptures is distinctly and unambiguously in our favour, they maintain that their spirit is against us*." [97: p16]

Listen also to what Charles Hodge, principal of Princeton Theological Seminary (1851-1878) had to say:

"*As it appears to us too clear to admit of either denial or doubt, that the scriptures do sanction slaveholding; that under the old dispensation it was expressly permitted by divine command, and under the New Testament is no where forbidden or denounced, but on the contrary acknowledged to be consistent with the Christian character and profession (that is, consistent with justice, mercy, holiness, love to God and love to man), to declare it to be a heinous crime, is a direct impeachment of the word of God."* [96: p108-109, quoting 98: p297-298]

The establishment and evangelical leaders in general (in Britain, in the South of the USA particularly but also in the North) was clear that slavery was God-ordained. "*What challenge there was came from people like Frederick Douglass, and before him Olaudah Equiano in Britain. What set them apart was a personal experience of enslavement, which led them to a different relationship with scripture and its relevance to slavery. Abolitionists like Douglass had no specific anti-slavery texts to which they could turn. Instead, they argued from passages such as Galatians 3:28 ('There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus') that the Bible preached a radical equality. Douglass in particular used the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) as the key to how you should interpret the whole Bible. He explained his approach in a speech in England, where he also addressed accusations that he was either too extreme or anti-biblical*." [96: p110]

This was how he responded:

"*I have found it difficult to speak on this matter without persons coming forward and saying, 'Douglass, are you not afraid of injuring the cause of Christ? You do not desire to do so, we know; but are you not undermining religion?' This has been said to me again and again, even since I came to this country, but I cannot be induced to leave off these exposures. I love the religion of our blessed Saviour, I love that religion that comes from above, in the 'wisdom of God, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.' I love that religion that sends its votaries to bind up the wounds of him that has fallen among thieves. I love that religion that makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction. I love that religion that is based upon the glorious principle, of love to God and love to man; which makes its followers do unto others as they themselves would be done by. If you demand liberty to yourself, it says, grant it to your neighbours*." [96: p110, quoting 99: p415-416]

While we will not focus on this here, Jonathan Tallon goes on the outline the lessons which we could learn in the midst of our current debate from the process of change which occurred in the days of the battle over the Abolition of Slavery. I have reproduced his comments in the References and Notes at the end of this article. [100]

There are those who argue for a kind of redemptive trajectory in Scripture as far as slavery is concerned. It is suggested that there was the development of hope in the New Testament which paved the way for the abolitionist movements if the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. [53]

Marcus Green sees this view as a misreading of the narrative in Scripture. There is no story of development. It is "a tale of safeguards and indicators placed on fallen humanity from the very beginning. This is why those who opposed the ending of slavery in Britain and the US and elsewhere were wrong but not - in their day - ridiculous." [47: p97]

Richard Burridge argues that it wasn't simply reference to the Bible which brought abolition. He highlights the biblical arguments deployed by both sides and then points to the stories told by the abolitionists about the contemporary slave trade. "*They publicised the facts. They made the truth personal, and they made it known*." [47: p98][54] They did not argue "*that their experience should take precedence over Scripture. But they ... made the case that their experience should cause Christians to reconsider long-held interpretations of Scripture*." [55: p15]

Interestingly, given the mention of a trajectory of hope in relation to the abolition of slavery, Marcus Green argues a good case for there being a clear trajectory of hope in Scripture in respect of changing attitudes to same-sex relationships and other forms of difference, including eunuchs [47: p99-105]

A change in attitude to Usury – It is beyond dispute that the Bible is clear, moneylending is wrong. If we follow this through to its logical conclusion, mortgages, interest-paying savings accounts, car loans and credit cards all need to be avoided by God's faithful people.

Wikipedia [101] tells us that the Old Testament "*condemns the practice of charging interest on a poor person because a loan should be an act of compassion and taking care of one's neighbour";* it teaches that "*making a profit off a loan from a poor person is exploiting that person (Exodus 22:25–27)*." [102] Similarly, charging of interest (Hebrew: נֶשֶׁךְ, (nešeḵ) or the taking of clothing as pledges is condemned in Ezekiel 18 (early 6th century BC), [103] and Deuteronomy 23:19 prohibits the taking of interest in the form of money or food when lending to a "brother"; it is not clear if this refers to an actual brother, a fellow Israelite or any human being. [104]

The New Testament likewise teaches giving rather than loaning money to those who need it: "And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. [Luke 6:34-36 NIV]

"*Before the reformation, about 500 years ago, the Church universally held that moneylending was wrong, and that this was a clear teaching of the Bible. The old term for moneylending is usury. The Church considered it a mortal sin … If you lent money for profit, you could not get a Christian burial. This approach continued into the reformation. For example, Martin Luther denounced lending money for profit, seeing it as wicked. If, for 1500 years, the Church uniformly thought moneylending was unbiblical and immoral, how has Christian thought shifted so radically?*" [96: p20-21]

Part of the reason for the change rests in the hands of Calvin. The Reformation was not only a time of significant religious change, the economic world was changing and questions were raised about whether moneylending could be countenance is some circumstances. Calvin was asked a question

about this in 1545. Calvin's reply "*proposed that, in certain circumstances, it might not be sinful to lend money. This was an incendiary idea, and the letter remained private until a decade after Calvin's death*." [96: p21]

Calvin "*considered the authority of the Bible compared with interpretations of the Bible. He emphasised the need to understand what the writings meant in their original context and to their original audience. He suggested that you need to look behind prohibitions in the Bible to see their purpose. Above all, the question of how this fitted in with justice and love needed to be addressed. Calvin recognised that the Bible's context and his own context, in 16th century Geneva, were radically different from each other. He argued that the Bible was addressing moneylending that was oppressive and harmful to the poor. This was potentially different from a business borrowing money to invest, where a loan could benefit both the lender and the borrower. In other words, the Biblical prohibitions were addressing a situation different enough from that in Geneva, that in some circumstances it could be fine to lend money for profit*." [96: p21]

The result was that the Church began to make a distinction "*between 'usury' – moneylending that is oppressive, that feeds on the poor, that is wicked – and taking out a mortgage so that you can make a large purchase and spread payments out over a long period of time*." [96: p22]

Calvin was arguing that the money lending practices of his time were different from '*usery*'. The two practices may have shared things in common but they were different enough in specific circumstances that did not harm the poor to mean that then-current practice was not covered by the biblical prohibition on 'usury'. But it remained possible for moneylending practices to become '*usury*' if they became exploitative.

The end of racial segregation and apartheid *- "During an interview in 2010, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu was asked how it can be that Christianity was used both to support and reject apartheid. He responded, 'It is people. Because as you were saying, some people are able to use the Bible as a means of opposing injustice, whereas others are able to find justification. You can find justification for slavery in the Bible. Some say this is what the Bible says and that closes the argument. You will find that the Bible, if you want it to, will justify many things.' ... The decades long pro-apartheid regime in South Africa was heavily supported by Christian denominations, specifically the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), while other denominations and prominent Christian leaders, such as Archbishop Tutu, strongly opposed this oppressive establishment*." [9]

It took decades for the Dutch Reformed Church to change its position: *"After being a key actor in upholding the Apartheid system, the DRC acknowledged their role in the matter and wanted to help rebuild South Africa. In 1986, Nelis van Rensburg, the Church's national moderator, said, 'We were very much complicit [in propping up [A]partheid]. We provided the theological base for [A]partheid. And that's how ideology works.' He also said the Church will continue to repent for its sins for as long as necessary, and will also try to put its words to action. Furthermore, the synod delegates stated that the system of Apartheid goes against brotherly love and justice and that it affects the human dignity*." [10]

The position of women in the church *- "It would be wrong to suggest that the problems of establishing the biblical teaching on men and women are only the result of our own subjectivity. The biblical data itself poses problems. The biblical data can be divided into two categories: there are particular passages that discuss men and women and their relationships; there are also more general considerations about how men, women and God himself are described in the Bible*." [11]

Specific bible passages speak directly to the question of the role of women in the church and historically the question was determined by a traditional perspective that men should take leadership roles and not women. It was experience of life in the world and a sense of natural justice that

challenged traditional thinking and resulted ultimately in the recent changes to the official doctrinal and ecclesiological thinking of the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion. [3]

The climate debate *(which is still ongoing, particularly in the United States of America, in 2022. I guess it might be considered out of place as an example here. I have chosen to include it because it is an example of how the position of the evangelical right is being questioned, rather than the position the right being based on scripture.) - "Although strong majorities in every religious group in the US believe the earth is getting warmer, only 31% of white* evangelicals believe the change is caused by human activity, a figure that is out of step with the overall view of the US population where 69% accept human induced climate change." [12] [13]

Donald Trump, together with many of his team questioned human induced climate change and withdrew from the COP 21 Paris Agreement on climate change and repealled America's Clean Power Plan. His "America-first Energy Plan" released during his election campaign: sought to reinvigorate the US's collapsing coal industry; lifted restrictions on fracking and drilling for oil and gas on federal lands. He favoured space research over climate change research. [12]

When Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement, his actions were condemned by the Episcopal Church, Catholic leaders, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and major Jewish, Muslim and Hindu organizations. But many evangelicals did not hold this view. "While evangelical beliefs about whether climate change is occurring vary, the environment has not been a priority for many evangelical leaders, ... the environment is not usually a high concern for them and many are openly skeptical of the government's involvement in the issue. Depending on whom you ask, evangelical attitudes on climate changed tend to be shaped by a combination of politics, race, theology and beliefs about science." [14]

"Half of white evangelicals say global warming is occurring, according to a 2015 survey from the Pew Research Center, but only a quarter of them say it is caused by humans. And just 24 percent say global warming is 'a serious problem.'" [14]

Erick Erickson, editor of the conservative website 'The Resurgent' said in 2017 that many evangelicals "do not believe climate change is real. They are deeply skeptical of scientists because they believe scientists are anti-Christian." [14]

Skepticism of man-made global warming is high among pastors, especially younger ones, according to a 2013 poll from Lifeway Research. Just 19 percent of pastors aged 18 to 44 agree with the statement, "I believe global warming is real and man made." [14] [15]

"The Christian right has been actively promoting climate change skepticism, especially on Christian radio and television. ... Evangelicals tend to believe climate change is a liberal issue. ... Many think it's about the government ... taking away our freedoms." [14]

Evangelical activists who seek to persuade their community of the reality of human induced global warming have sought to address environmental issues in the Unites States of America, not by resorting to biblical exegesis but by reframing political arguments, naming climate change "as a "pro-life issue" due to its impact on children's health, citing 'ozone pollution and warmer temperatures' link to asthma and Lyme disease. The network has focused on people's individual responsibility to reduce their environmental footprint and conservative solutions to climate change, such as cap and trade, which lets the market find the cheapest way to cut emissions." [14] This appears to be another issue over which re-imagining scripture's message grows out of lived experience in the world of today.

Other examples include:

- the use of birth control in marriage, which the Anglican Church historically saw as a 'sin against nature' and only agreed to permit at the 1930 Lambeth Conference, with strong dissent at the time. A more positive statement had to wait until 1958. [28: p44] Many Christian couples who use contraception are ignorant of the Church's ferocious opposition to its introduction. [28: p52]
- the altering attitude of much of the Church to remarriage after divorce. Particularly the "*contemporary evangelical understanding on remarriage among Christians, notwithstanding its apparently unqualified prohibition in 1 Corinthians 7:10,11*." [28: p53]
- the existence and discovery of America. [48: p2]
- the growth in understanding of disease and its treatment. [48: p2]

In each of these cases a period of theological and societal conflict brought about (or is bringing about) a significant change and very few people would now suggest that the decisions made by the Church in such periods of change and on the basis of experience should be reversed.

In each case, there was no dominant, prior, significant scriptural support in the form of proof texts for the change. People's experiences or knowledge brought about a necessity to return to the testimony of Scripture. The criteria by which these changes can best be understood is in the light of what has been called, the 'whole counsel of scripture'; and a seeking of the 'mind of Christ'. Ultimately, the majority of us, see the changes brought about as being what God wants.

The judgements made in each of these cases do not contradict the 'whole counsel of scripture' but there was no direct, conclusive warrant for the conclusions reached that was dictated by texts of scripture. In some cases, indeed, the proof texts about the issues still seem to be in conflict with the conclusions reached. And yet we deem the conclusions reached to be correct.

This is not to say that simple parallels can be drawn between these cases "*and arguments over homosexuality. But it is to suggest that the argument cannot realistically be resolved by a process of moral decision-making that takes absolutely no account whatsoever of the changed situation of homosexual people today*." [48: p2] Nor does it obviate the need to listen to modern thinking/knowledge.

Reform of Christian teaching in the various instances above did not suggest that human experience and culture should in some way trump Scripture. What is/was suggested in many of these cases is/was that, "*the obvious exclusion, injustice and destructive outcomes of widely held beliefs should take Christians back to the text to consider a different perspective, one which might better reflect the heart of God*." [3]

Ultimately, the truth is that we are not always being faithful to the Scriptures and to the God who inspired them when we cling tightly to the words themselves alone as they appear to us in our culture. We have to ask questions of the text of God's Word. We must first reflect on the meaning of what we read in the Bible, within the cultures in which the messages in our Bibles were written before looking for their meaning for today.

Asking questions of this nature places us within a long tradition of Anglican thought, practice and theology. Richard Hooker speaking and writing in the 16th century created a set of interpretive tools for the Anglican Church and Communion: "*The interaction of 'what Scripture doth plainly deliver', what one can ' necessarily conclude from the force of reason' and 'the voice of the Church', often abbreviated as 'Scripture', 'Reason' and 'Tradition'*." [49: p2][50] The Anglican Communion has remained loyal to this tradition for over 420 years. (Although his thinking has also been subject to hermeneutical debate!)

We will also need "*(as Pilling* [27] *frequently reminds us) 'a complex process of theological discernment, a process that begins with the discipline of listening, which requires the ability to move*

outside the limitations of our own experience to pay attention to what God is doing in the experience of others." [4: p48] [16]

"*When Christians argue about homosexuality and its compatibility with the Bible, they are actually arguing about homosexual practice. ... Their argument cannot but be affected ... by contemporary understanding of what constitutes human identity – psychological , biological, social as well as moral. The modern understanding of human biology, and in particular of genetics, of the role of early years (and the closest family relationships) in psychological formation, and if the challenge and relevance of social values in relation to gender and sexual relationships – these are all matters on which the modern world has much to say that was not known, not well understood, or at least understood differently, in the past*." [48: p1-2]

Loveday Alexander asks how it can be "*right for the church today to construct a sexual ethic for 'LGBT' people — that is, people whose homosexual orientation we accept as a 'given' of their sexual identity — on an anthropology of desire that does not recognise such orientation? It would be like basing our medical treatment of epilepsy on the Gospel story of the epileptic child in Mark 9.17-27. Mark's description of the child's condition belongs to his own cultural world, in which epilepsy was a form of demon-possession. In retelling the story in our world, we can affirm the timeless truth (Jesus' power to heal a sick child) without perpetuating a first century medical diagnosis*." [4: p45] Nonetheless, it is to Scripture that we must turn if we are to begin to engage properly in this debate.

Reverting to Scripture

Before looking at specific texts, we need to agree what Scripture is and what we are doing when we read Scripture. It is important to acknowledge that the Bible is "*a collection of books gathered together over many centuries. It contains laws, poems, stories, letters, wisdom sayings, and prophetic pronouncements. ... The Bible ... rings with the voices of all kinds of people. It is shaped by their differing backgrounds, their cultures, their assumptions and their experiences - including their affections and desires, their intimate relationships, and their sense of their own identity*." [90: p274] We also cannot but accept that "*our own reading of the Bible is no less shaped by history. Our backgrounds, our experience and our assumptions influence how we read - and so do the background, experience and assumptions of all the people who taught us how to read it. When we read, we are as entangled in the tapestry of history as is the Bible*." [90: p274-275]

We affirm, as Anglicans, "*the sovereign authority of the Holy Scriptures as the medium through which God by the Spirit communicates his word in the Church and thus enables people to respond with understanding and faith. The Scriptures are 'uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation', and 'the primary norm for Christian faith and life'*." (The Virginia Report (1997) [90: p275][92]

Across all our differences, Anglican continue to affirm that "*God gives us the Bible for two central and inseparable purposes. The first is to tell us the good news of God's saving love, and the second is to call the whole world into holiness.*" [90: p275][93]

Given that understanding there are a number of things which we need to confirm before we continue this article:

First: we need to agree where we sit in relation to Scripture. As Maggi Dawn says: "*We need to avoid falling into the trap of viewing scripture as a means of resolving arguments to which we have set the agenda. If we are to make any progress with the issue at hand, and do so while also observing the overriding call of Christ to love one another, it is essential that we not only read the scriptures, but allow the scriptures to 'read us'*." [83: p13]

Second: we need to agree what we are dealing with. When we talk of Scripture having some kind of authority over us, what do we mean? "*Within Christian thought, the idea of 'the Word' is associated primarily not with the Bible, but with Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate. This idea goes back*

both to the Greek and the Hebrew influences upon Christianity, speaking both of the centrality of language to human experience and communication, but also of the fact that there is more to communication than words alone." [83: p13] A narrative thread throughout the Bible is that written words are not enough, not even the spoken word delivered by the prophets. Jeremiah's prophecy of a New Covenant exemplifies this theme. That New Covenant "*will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD*." [Jeremiah 31:31-34]

When God communicates, God's primary communication with us is not a set of words. It is, in fact, himself. 'The Word' in the first Chapter of John's Gospel "*indicates that there is a self-communication from God, not merely an exchange of information, and for this reason words alone are inadequate, and flesh-and-blood became the means through which God made himself known to us. ... This complex relationship between 'the Word' and words lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of the Bible, and to read with expectation of discerning the mind of God on any given issue is to remain alive to the complexities of this relationship. So, while we owe it to ourselves and our tradition to guard and treasure a high view of the Bible, we need to avoid venerating scripture excessively, to the point where it displaces Christ the Word, and silences the capacity of Christ the Word, to speak through the words on the page*." [83: p14] We must recognise that the Scriptures are authoritative and "*part of the means through which we discern and understand God's revelation of himself to us precisely because they are a witness to Christ - the true Word of God*." [83: p14]

Christians may disagree about many things, but as Arnold Browne says "*they agree that they read the Bible in order to hear and respond to Jesus Christ, the Word of God. The very first Christian writer learned to read his Jewish scriptures in this way. Paul explained to the Corinthian congregation that now, 'whenever Moses is read', he sees 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Corinthians 3.15-4.4). Now when he reads the account of creation in Genesis 1-2 his focus is on Jesus: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4.6).*" [85: p33]

Third: we cannot but acknowledge that passages of Scripture are not always simple, unambiguous, straightforward or clear. For example: "*The four Gospels record contradictory accounts of the words of Jesus. Within those accounts, Jesus frequently refuses to give a straight answer to a question. On some occasions, he even claimed to be obfuscating issues deliberately. The idea that the words of Jesus are straightforward, at least as we have them on record, is not a textual reality but theological wish - a desire for there to be clarity and accessibility of meaning that the scriptures themselves do not seem either to promise or to deliver.*" [83: p16]

"*Reading scripture in the light of Christ leads …. to a diversity of interpretation from the beginning of Christianity. Paul's reading can differ not only from that of his fellow Jews but also of his fellow Christians*." [85: p34] [86] Browne argues that this is apparent in Paul's understanding of Moses veil (2 Corinthians 3:7-13) which Paul sees, rather than a veiling of the glory of God on Moses' face, but as a veiling of Moses' face to hide the gradual diminishing of the glory that was present. It is also evident in Paul's argument about his singleness as opposed to the other apostle's married status, and his working rather than relay, as others do, on the congregations they visit. (1 Corinthians 9:3-18) As we will see below, he also argues, contrary to others, that Gentiles do not need to first comply with the law becoming Christians. (cf. Galatians 5:22-25 and Philippians 3:2-4 and Acts 15(below)). Generally, "*Paul does not question the other apostles' interpretation of scripture or deny that they too are following Jesus. Instead, he defends his own position by interpreting scripture in the light of Christ. He reads these scriptural texts not as commands that he must obey, but as rights that he has received. And, in the light of Christ, he gives up these rights*," in one particular case, to be accompanied by a wife and to be supported by the Christian community (1 Corinthians 9.12-18)." [85: p34-35][cf. the detail of this argument in relation to Jesus in ref. 86 below.]

Following Jesus takes precedence over any system of rules. Our desire to codify things means that our inability to tie down what is right and wrong can be very uncomfortable. From the early church on (see Acts 15 below), the Church found Jesus' capacity to "*cross boundaries between clean and unclean, the sacred and the profane, … too shocking. … The call to follow Christ before all other considerations led early Christians like St Paul to see all rules, even the law of Moses, … as being of secondary importance. So … our primary concern should be our faithfulness to Jesus' call to share his life and destiny, rather than the adoption of either a supposed strictness or an assumed leniency to fill in the gaps when we find that he is silent*." [85: p44-45]

Fourth: we also have to acknowledge that we are very unlikely to be able to accurately translate everything in the Bible into our own language without both changing its meaning and bringing something of ourselves to the translated text. Objectivity is, in fact, an illusion. There are numerous examples of original texts over which scholars will disagree over the appropriate translation. The possibility of accessing the original meaning would be dependent on being present in the culture in which those words were written, and even that possibility would be confused by the different views of those listening to those original words and writing them down. It is of great interest, to me at least that when the King James Version of the Bible was translated into English, "*the committee appointed to oversee the King James translation was selected not to narrow down single meanings, but on the basis that their diversity of church background and theological bias would guarantee that the texts would be rendered into English that deliberately included ambiguities of meaning. It is well known that, as a translation, it is by modern-day standards full of scholarly errors, which tend to be forgiven on the basis of its historical and literary value. But what is often overlooked is that the translation incorporates a variety of interpretations, embodying the sense that the authority of the text derived more from its capacity to hold differing views together than from an understanding of scripture as conveying one clear and unambiguous set of meanings. The King James Version deliberately encompassed, and even celebrated, ambiguity, and in so doing became the text to which a broad church could turn for its authority.*" [83: p17] cf. [84]

Of, perhaps, incidental interest at this point in our discussion, but perhaps of greater significance for a concern for the unity of the church and an understanding of the way in which history suggests that this has been maintained, is King James' avowed desire that relationships among his subjects should be based on 'love'. Adam Nicolson, in '*Power and Glory*' talks a great deal about James' intention to maintain unity and love in the church of which he was supreme governor, and about his concern for the development of his new translation should maintain continuity with the past and should be an instrument to bring factions together. There we two sides to King James. "*His troubled upbringing had shaped a man with a divided nature. Later history … has chosen only the ridiculous aspects of James: his extravagance, his vanity, his physical / ugliness, his weakness for beautiful boys, his self-inflation, his self-congratulatory argumentativeness. … But there was another side to James which breathed dignity and richness: a desire for wholeness and consensus, for inclusion and breadth, for a kind of majestic grace, lit by the clarity of a probing intelligence, rich with the love of dependable substance, for a reality that went beyond show, that was not duplicitous, that stood outside all the corruption and rot that glimmered around him*." [84: p60-61]

"*It can be no surprise that the king, in whose speeches the word 'love' comes up in paragraph after paragraph, and for whom unity was an almost sacred watch-word, should summon a huge committee to do the work; it is unthinkable that he should have done it in any other way. The only mind that could have produced the King James Bible was the mind of England itself*." [84: p70]

Fifth: even if we were able to provide a completely accurate agreed translation of everything in the Bible, we still have a further matter to acknowledge. Each reader interprets what they read. "*Even at the most basic level of schoolroom reading, we interpret as we read. Children reading stories at bedtime or in the classroom ask questions constantly - 'Why did that happen?', 'What does that word mean?', 'If he's a "goodie', why did he do a bad thing?' And from their earliest reading children learn*

to interpret according to their knowledge and experience, by comparing what's happening in the story with what they already know, and with what they have read elsewhere." [83: p17-18] This interpretative action happens, and should happen, whatever kind of text we are reading. Even "*reading the law … is a matter of constant reinterpretation, for even legal texts, which aim to be as clear, unambiguous and stable as possible, are subject to constant shifts in meaning as the cultural habitat changes. The mode of expression and the cultural assumptions that guide the writing of a law give it the potential either to be misinterpreted and misapplied, or to be reinterpreted and used justly in later generations. As with law, so with sacred texts.*" [83: p18]

Interpreters with integrity seek, as best they can, to ensure that the interpretation of texts written in genres which do not necessarily have modern equivalents, do not depart from the integrity of the original texts. They seek to "*render a reading that says more clearly, more accurately in our current context, what this text was intended to mean and, in the context of a succession of cultural or geographical changes, to allow its particular interpretation to shift in order to maintain its faithfulness to the spirit of its meaning.*" [83: p18]

Sixth: interpretation of the Bible offers very little of value if we seek to use it as a way of reinforcing our own views. Almost inevitably we will find something in the Scriptures which will do this. Rather, if we accept that the Bible may not answer the specific question we are asking, or it may not give us only one answer, or it may give us only a provisional and partial answer. We are most likely to be listening to the text! "*Living with uncertainty and unclosed arguments is one of the hardest calls within Christianity. So often we want to close the deal, and settle the issue, and make things safe and certain. But this is not the way of the Spirit.* [83: p19]

This may be what God is calling us to - "*Acknowledging that there is, at one and the same time, a core of tradition a recognizable thread of continuity and a margin of flexibility in application from one generation to the next, one culture to the next, is to say that we see in our faith both the stability of truth and the flexibility of a living faith.*" [83: p20]

Nowhere in "*Anglican history has there ever been a requirement to reach identical answers in every corner of the Church in order to have unity. It is possible to have diverging views, to disagree and still to walk together. But this uncomfortable unity is possible only by allowing the scriptures to be not [a]rule book, but a living, breathing body of literature through which we engage with God, and which is as likely to 'read us' as to be read by us.*" [83: p20]

To live then with different interpretations/understandings is not to ignore opinions, nor even to compromise what we hold most dearly but it is "*to walk sufficiently in humility and with a commitment to listening to the community that we continue to walk together despite substantial disagreements. We have divine permission to disagree. But we have no such permission to write one another off.*" [83: p20] Reading Scripture in "*the light of Christ leads not only to a diversity of interpretation but also to an acceptance of such diversity*." [85: p35][86]

"*Holding different interpretations in tension, living with ambiguity of meaning, and searching for the right balance between continuity and discontinuity, do not leave us with a compromised view of scripture, but one that is, in the end, a higher view than one that insists on one, clear and unambiguous meaning. Why? Because this is a view, not of the Bible as a flat, impersonal book of rules, but of a collection of texts that connect us to a living God. With all its frustrations and difficulties, this is a view of scripture and a walk of faith - that is a much higher calling than mere obedience to the letter.*" [83: p21]

We are called to bear in mind that the Scriptures are not mine nor yours but ours, whoever we are, Conservative, Liberal, Gay, Straight, Catholic or Protestant; ultimately, the place that we listen first and last for God's voice. For "*, if God is God, there is only one Church. If the Church does separate and go in different directions, it will not be at the call of scripture, but through the misuse of methods of interpretation to endorse one voice over another. If we walk rightly, our methods of interpretation*

will be undergirded by compassion, by a determination to listen carefully to others, and by the conviction that above all things we are called to love one another." [83: p21]

As we do so, we perhaps also need to think carefully about how we best reflect on the meaning of the different texts and passages that we read. Duleep de Chickera suggests three principles or approaches that we should consider: [79: 92ff]

- The impact of text on text: at times texts seem to give contradictory teaching or direction. We need to look for guidance "*from the other two approaches as well, and to work for consensus this way, rather than rush into conclusions based on select texts only, incompatible with the ethos of wider biblical teaching*." [79: p92]
- The impact of theme on text: this is perhaps the most significant in our present discussion, "*overriding biblical themes or motifs, consistent through the whole Bible, such as grace, love, mercy, salvation, freedom and so on, must impact on select texts if biblical teaching on ethics and morality is to be adequately interpreted. We have this example in Christ when he met the misuse of select texts on the Sabbath, murder, adultery and so on through the broader framework of the priority of humans and the value of human relationships in God's design (Mark 2:27-28; Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28). … The literalism of a select text must be subject to interpretation in terms of the wider character, expectation and designs of God. This again seems to be Paul's argument in Galatians when he refutes those who advocated circumcision (mutilation of the body), clearly defendable with select texts, in the light of the new freedom and culture (liberation of the person) that Christ brings humans, and for which at the time of writing there was little written scriptural endorsement (Galatians 5:1). The oral tradition was just evolving by the grace of the Holy Spirit*." [79: p92-93]; and,
- The impact of context on text: as we have already noted, "*Anglicans believe that revelation and inspiration by the Holy Spirit, who inspired the written word, continue beyond the biblical manuscript. This is why tradition (the accumulation of the church's experience and practice through interaction with God's world, much of it through trial and error) and reason (knowledge, thinking and advancement which when tested and approved in the light of God's design, become gifts of God meant to be taken cognisance of by the church) are also contextual vehicles for doing theology and discerning the purposes of God. As the Spirit speaks and challenges the church through its context, an impact is made on the frail and sinful church's understanding of the Scriptures*." [79: p93]

"*Although it's unlikely that the biblical authors had any notion of sexual orientation (... the term homosexual wasn't even coined until the late 19th century) for many people of faith, the Bible is looked to for timeless guidance on what it means to honour God with our lives; and this most certainly includes our sexuality*." [3] This central place of the scriptures is acknowledged by many of those who engage in this debate.

In a book written to assist Anglicans in discussions about human sexuality, [4] Loveday Alexander says: "*The Bible actually says nothing about 'homosexuality' as it is understood today — that is, about sexual orientation as a 'given.' The biblical texts prohibiting same-sex relations arise out of a very different anthropology of desire — one that is widespread in ancient culture. For the few biblical writers who mention same-sex relations (as for other ancient writers), same-sex attraction is a moral disorder, a voluntary choice made by heterosexual people, and thus an expression of uncontrolled and often aggressive sexual desire*." [4: p31]

In trying to understand the texts below we need to be careful to ensure that they do properly relate to the matter at hand. Ian Paul, a strong advocate for the traditional position, nevertheless encourages us in his essay, '*The Biblical Case for the 'Traditional Position*'' to read these texts carefully, pointing out that none of the texts "*specify the sin of Sodom as same-sex sexual relations, and modern commentators are right to note that the primary offence was a violent breach of hospitality*." [47:

p31][51] He goes on to point out too that "*Jude 7 is difficult to interpret; it would be an odd expression for same-sex activity, and perhaps hints at the bizarre idea of having sex with angels*." [51]

Marcus Green asks us to consider additional texts which might (as proof-texts) give a more rounded picture, although he cautions against assuming they are anything approaching conclusive evidence:

- verses relating to male shrine prostitutes (eg. Deuteronomy 23:17-18 and 2 Kings 23:7)
- the friendship if David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18ff)
- the centurion's slave (depending on the translation of one Greek word, 'pais', either 'boy' or 'passive sexual partner' (Matthew 8)
- the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8, cf. Matthew 19)

Indeed, this illustrates the problem of proof texts, [47: p31-34] which can easily be overplayed by either side in any argument. Green cautions further care, in that homosexuality is not a major biblical theme, and reducing it to a handful of proof texts is not a helpful way to begin to think about it. [47: p34] In fact, for those who claim to be evangelicals, using a small number of texts in that way is distinctly un-evangelical. And "*sticking to proof texts should quickly show us that the issue of homosexuality is one of the byways of Scripture. But ... looking at the whole counsel of the Bible soon reminds us that a concern with people - all people - and how we treat all people is constantly permanently repeatedly one of the highways of God's word*." [47: p35]

Later in his book, Green, who sees himself as an evangelical, writes: "*We evangelicals are supposed to be people of the Book - the whole Book. Not just a text here or there. When we formulate theologies and ethics, especially important and restrictive ones on limited parts of Scripture, it can never be enough to say: 'Of course, the Bible says homosexuality is bad - all the texts about it say the same thing'. We might just be reading all those limited references out of their proper context, or failing to translate them fairly into our own context. When I talk about Romans 1,* [see below] *I hope I am never trying to water down the text or wriggle out of plain truth. I honestly believe I'm offering a good, sound, reasonable way of looking at a Scripture that does not actually lead to the conclusion 'homosexuality is bad' because it takes seriously the bigger picture of what the words are saying and how St Paul uses them to draw that bigger canvas. ... I don't want or need everyone to agree with me. That would require some pretty selfish and arrogant defining of 'church' or 'truth' on my part. What do ask is that (agree or not) we develop our positions not on the basis of party line or presumption or prejudice, but on Scripture. I'm happy to talk Scripture, and when I understand I'm in the wrong I'm more than happy to change and to do better. But where we just disagree - then let us have the possibility of difference here as evangelicals, as we do on every other secondary issue under the sun.* ***Adiaphora****. The 'big house'. And let's demonstrate a kind and godly generosity to accept each other as loved by God and being people of good heart who desire to serve him.*

Bearing in mind these words of caution and seeking to value Green's comments, let's look at some of those passages in turn. [cf. 4: p32-35]

Genesis 19 includes an unfulfilled threat of homosexual rape and is paralleled to a great extent by Judges 19. What is most shocking about the Genesis story is "*Lot's readiness to sacrifice his daughters to gang rape in an attempt to salvage the honour of his (male) guests*." [4: p32] [17] But neither the homosexual rape nor Lot's readiness to sacrifice his daughters (however shocking) is the main theme of the passage. Other biblical references find the hospitality question in Sodom to be important. [47: p31] The fate of Sodom and Gommorah was already decided before this incident (Genesis 18:20-33). There is no suggestion elsewhere in the Old Testament that homosexual practice was the cause of God's judgement. Vasey points us to "*various prophetic warnings to Israel [which] imply that it was the sins she shared with Sodom that might bring her to the same fate (cf. Isaiah 1:10; Amos 4:11).*" [28: p125] Ezekiel gives us the clearest definition of Sodom's sin:

> *"She and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abominable things before me."* (Ezekiel 16: 49-50)

In context, in Ezekiel 16, those '*abominable things'* are Israel's flagrant and insatiable idolatry. So, Sodom was judged for her pride, her idolatry and her failure to meet social needs! "*The attempted rape of the visitors is evidence not of sexual deviance but of an arrogant and violent society*." [28: p125]

If we take this story and place it alongside the story in Judges 19 we note that many of the same words are used. It is true that the homosexual element of the story in Judges 19 would, much as did that element in Genesis 19, would have provoked horror in those who first read it - "*but primarily horror at the violation of masculinity and ideas of what men should be. That men could be penetrated, be passive, be abused, as women are, is an existential threat to their concept of what it means to be male. Sex here is used as a weapon: if the Levite himself is not raped, then he is humiliated through the rape of his concubine, whom he is unable (or unwilling) to protect. His masculinity is diminished either way. The exchange shows that sexual orientation is not a primary concern of the narrative. And behind both texts, the spectre of male-on-male sexual violence is raised as a possibility so taboo that it is never actualised in the text itself, yet remains as a testimony to the danger of power struggles. Reading Genesis 19 and Judges 19 together begs us to consider questions of power and violence as central to both texts*." [90: p286]

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 mention male homosexual activity as an 'abomination' "*(female homosexual activity is not mentioned at all). These passages are part of the 'Holiness Code', which seeks to establish clear lines of demarcation between Israel's moral code and those of the pagan nations around. The 'mixing' of gender roles in same-sex relations ('lying with a man as with a woman') is prohibited as part of a wider code prohibiting various kinds of 'mixing' (mixed crops in a field, mixed fibres in clothing)*." [4: p32] "*These two verses are central to the strong Christian tradition that anal intercourse between men is absolutely incompatible with Christian discipleship*." [28: p126]

In understanding the relevance of these two verses to the world of the 21st century we need to ask: How should they be interpreted? How does the wider symbolic context of the day give meaning to these verses? To what extent, then, are they binding on Christians? [28: p126]

Throughout the Old Testament (indeed the whole of the Bible) there are a series of examples of things which seem to engender a cultural hostility of some nature. These include: a hatred of Edom (Obadiah; Isaiah 63:1-6); an animosity towards dogs [65] echoed by Jesus (Matthew 7: 6; 15:26) and Paul (Philippians 3:2); even a generally negative view of the sea (cf. 'the sea was no more' (Revelation 21:1)). In modern parlance, being 'gay' is seen as a characteristic vice of the idolatrous Gentile world. [47: p55]

In the context of Leviticus' Holiness Code, these verses are "*set within a complex symbolic system that gives meaning to bodily discharges and is concerned to preserve both the stability of a clan-based society and the distinctiveness of Israel from the surrounding nations*." [28: p126] Their applicability to today has to be judged in this light, and in the light of Jesus' statements about the law, and in the light of our status of being under 'grace' rather than the 'law'. In summary, these verses need to be read with care, their impact on us has to be assessed through four different filters: "*they arose at a particular period in Israel's history and were not treated as immutable when social conditions changed;*[66] *they are presented to us as part of larger theological works and should be seen not simply as laws but as elements within the total message of a book; their context is a particular stage in God's unfolding dealings with his people, so that their meaning today must be determined in the light of Jesus's teaching and example; they are part of a symbolic system which does not apply to Christians*." [67]

Living in Love and Faith points out that the 'Holiness Code' was intended to "*create a safe space that protected the more vulnerable, and enabled [a] household to flourish as a whole. Any action that threatened the well-being or survival of the household is treated severely, hence the use of the word 'abomination'*." [90: p287]

The important question "*about these verses is therefore the scope of the prohibition: is it a prohibition for all people, at all times, or restricted to (already married) men with dependents? Even if the prohibition seems to apply fairly indiscriminately, this does not tell us how it should transfer to a different context or be understood in canonical context*." [90: p288]

After all, there are many laws from Leviticus that Christians feel under no compulsion to follow, some of them because they are considered to be culture- and time-bound and others because the Bible itself gives us clear theological reasons why they no longer apply in the light of Christ. Leviticus 18's introduction and conclusion both emphasize that the practices forbidden to Israel are characteristic of non-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. "*So, it is possible that the prime force of the prohibition is against a specifically Canaanite practice, against which Israel's identity is demarcated. rather than a universal directive - though it is unclear why something displeasing to God in the Canaanite world would be solely culturally-bound, Levitical laws, however, are sometimes reflected in New Testament teaching, and these verses are generally agreed to be the source of comments on same sex activity in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1, which indicates that they were seen as scripturally authoritative for Christian ethical discipleship.*" [90: p288]

Deuteronomy 23: 17,18 prohibits cult prostitution in Israel [32: p94-106] which was a perennial problem in Israel before the exile. These verses have no direct relevance to the question of faithful, monogamous relationships.

In **Romans 1: 26-27** "*Homosexual practice (male and female) is singled out as specially characteristic of the sins of the Gentile world. In Paul's anthropology of desire, same-sex relationships are 'contrary to nature': that is, they represent a distortion of the default sexual identity, which Paul assumes to be heterosexual*. [19] *Like other post-biblical Jewish writers, Paul sees same-sex activity as a manifestation of the pagan world's underlying sin of idolatry:* [Romans 1.18-23] '*worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator' leads to all manner of sexual impurity*." [Romans 1: 24-25][4: p33]

"*This passage forms part of a more general theological description of a fallen world in which no-one, Jew nor Greek, can "boast" (Romans 3.27) in the presence of God: "since all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God," all stand equally in need of the gift of redemption through God's grace (Romans 3.23-24)*." [4: p33]

Loveday Alexander notes that *"Two other passages in the epistles include homosexual practices (active and passive) in a list of sinful practices which Christians should avoid: the lists include idolatry, adultery, robbery, greed, drunkenness, rapacity, murder, kidnapping and slander: **1 Corinthians 6.9**; **1 Timothy 1.9-10***." [4: p33]

In **1 Timothy 1:8-11** we find a "*wide-ranging list of vices which are described as contrary to both the law and the gospel. The term found in 1 Corinthians 6 and apparently coined by Paul based on Leviticus reappears here. Accordingly, the arguments on the meaning of the term there would apply here also, and with the same scriptural undergirding*." [90: p293]

"*Once again there are debates as to what is being referred to and the rationale for the list. Some have argued that the list follows the order of the Ten Commandments and that the term translated here as sodomites refers to same-sex sexual behaviour as violation of the seventh commandment against adultery. (As we noted earlier this is arguably also the significance of the list of sexual offences that follow the primary one of adultery in Leviticus 20.10), Others, however, tie the term to the phrase that*

follows, which refers to slave traders. It could then be understood to refer to same-sex prostitution and to what we could call sex trafficking of male slaves though that would be an unusual and debatable extension of the single word Paul uses." [90: p293]

Green agrees that Paul's main point in this chapter of Romans is to identify '***Idolatry***' as the heart of all sin. [47: p39-44] What is surprising in this passage in Romans 1, is that it is really hard for Paul to argue a case that idolatry leads inexorably to immorality (the worst of which is homosexuality). If you wanted to make that argument from the Old Testament, it is unlikely that same-sex sex would even occur to you. There are perhaps as many as six references to homoeroticism in the Old Testament, there are over 360 injunctions relating to heterosexual sex! The Old Testament is constantly bringing straight people to heel over their sexual behaviour. [47: p44-46]

With our cultural spectacles on,we see a logical progression that would not have been logical to an observant Jew of Paul's day. Paul is not beginning "*his great theological treatise with an issue that would be irrelevant to almost all of his readers/hearers. He could be obtuse, but not when he wanted to say something that really mattered. ... Understanding why Paul refers to homosexual behaviour in Romans 1 requires us to understand the journey of the general argument of idolatry to immorality, and to understand both how Paul shapes that argument - and who his targets are.* " [47: p47-48]

"*Our modern worldview inevitably affects us when we read St. Paul. We see that he has a religious understanding that sets up his moral ethic*." [47: p49]

This is however, not a 'this-is-true-so-this-follows' argument. There is no set of clear boundaries in Paul's mind between idolatry and immorality. The two are entwined. To us, Paul seems to be muddling through an argument when actually he only needed an equation - this leads to that. So we see Paul as perhaps a bit sloppy in his writing. But, "*what if that's not what is going on? What if it's not St. Paul's thinking that's sloppy but ours?*" [47: p50] What if Paul is actually operating in a culture where idolatry and immorality are inextricably linked. "*For us this is hard to grasp. We continually fail to grasp how big a deal idolatry is in the Scriptures. ... Wrong worship is the whole journey in itself. It doesn't take us anywhere other than away from God. It is its own end. When we have chosen it, we have already arrived*." [47: p51]

"*How you worship shows who you worship. It's who you worship that matters. ... The descriptions of abandoning God and of various kinds of sexual excess in Romans 1 are all about how people worshipped. ... If you have chosen to worship God, who is faithful and true, you will lead a life if faithfulness and truth in all your relationships. ... We become who we worship, so choose carefully, except the choice has already been made and it wasn't careful.*" [47: p53-54]

So, Green continues to argue, it is "*not a question of straight and gay - every excessive behaviour is condemned in these passages. It's a question of who is God, and what is God like, and also - how God's agenda shapes the lives of those who follow him*." [47: p54-55] Paul is not writing of a small group of gay men in ancient Rome. He "*is describing every Jew's (at least of his period) caricature of the entire idolatrous Gentile world. It's ancient Egypt, ancient Canaan, it's Babylon, it's Corinth, it's certainly Rome. They're all at it.*" [47: p55] This passage in Romans is not about sex. It is about what Paul's readers should think about the whole Gentile world system of his day. [cf. 28: p129-134]

Paul then goes on to challenge Jewish culture in Romans 2 and 3. They are just as guilty of immorality - 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). Gays are just not what Paul is talking about in Romans 1. Green concludes: "*By no means can anyone twist the text to have St. Paul say 'Gays are great' - but he doesn't say the opposite either. It's just not what he is talking about.*" [47: p57]

"*St Paul's point is about idolatry; he cares passionately that people's hearts are broken away from God's. One of his illustrations within that is a specific use of sexuality that doesn't quite fit our common reference*." [47: p66]

The precise meanings of the words used in all the proof texts about homosexuality has occasioned some dispute, "*but there is no real doubt that they identify various forms of culturally unacceptable sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual. But the precise language used reveals a social construction of same-sex relations as a shameful distortion of 'natural' gender roles, in which one male partner takes a 'female' (i.e. passive, submissive, inferior) role. To use the word 'homosexual' in these texts is arguably to impose on Paul a modern concept that belongs to our world, not to his. Paul's ethical instructions are addressed to first century men (very rarely to women) using first-century moral categories that reflect his own hybrid cultural identity as an observant Jew, with a Greek education, growing up in the Roman empire*." [4: p34]

"*However, taken as a whole, the Bible has very little to say about homosexual activity, even in the ancient sense: and it is important to put the negative texts in a broader context. The debate is often conducted purely in terms of 'what the Bible says': but which parts of the Bible? Do 'biblical values' embrace the primitive value system of the patriarchal narratives, in which women are seen as legitimate objects of male sexual violence? Or the affectionate friendship between David and Jonathan? So we need to ask, why these texts, and what is their position in relation to the biblical canon as a whole?*" [4: p34]

Loveday Alexander goes on to ask why Leviticus figures so large in this discussion? "*Are Christians bound by all the prohibitions of Leviticus (and if not, why just this one)? Traditional Christian teaching has held that Christians are bound by the moral Law embodied in the Ten Commandments, but not by the rest of the 613 mitzvoth: and the Ten Commandments say nothing about homosexual practice*." [4: p35]

Leviticus 19 forbids many things, all its prohibitions we seem happy to set aside except those relating to same-sex sex. Loveday Alexander is right to point out that ... "*Reading the Law for Christians has always been a matter not of simple appropriation but of canonic interpretation: we are called to read the Law in light of the Gospel, not the other way round*." [4: p35]

"*When we come to the NT,*" Loveday Alexander continues, "*it is important to observe that the Gospels contain no explicit teaching on same-sex relationships. In a canonic context, this silence is significant. Many find it odd that a church which has found it quite possible to ignore a hard dominical saying on divorce (on which Jesus is quite explicit) struggles to accommodate same-sex relationships (on which Jesus says nothing at all). Even in the Epistles, we have to note that in none of these passages is sexuality the main point at issue: all three cite homosexual practice as an example in a much longer standardized list of sinful practices. Paul's view of homosexual behaviour is uniformly negative: it is cited as a sin typical of the Gentile world. But it is not intrinsic to the argument: other sins are listed, and others could have been chosen without diminishing the force of the argument.*" [4: p35]

In addition to the passages from Acts referred to earlier in this article, can we look elsewhere in Scripture for guidance in our desire to be faithful to the truth of God's Word and to our experience and knowledge of the world in which we live?

Perhaps, before we look at the wider counsel of Scripture, we need to acknowledge some important things which Marcus Green points us to:

- First, there is a perception around that if the church listens to any gay voices it is tantamount to accepting the whole 'gay agenda'. This cannot be true. Listening is just that, 'listening', it is not agreement and it definitely is not the beginning of a 'slippery slope' which leads to destruction. [cf. 47: p69]

- Second, not all heterosexual people are good. Green says: "*Yet clearly we agree God loves people. Perhaps especially the ones in severe need. ...Likewise, not all gay people are good. And yet God loves us. And not all gay people are extreme. Gay people are as varied as it is possible to be, and a blanket rejection is as ridiculous as blanket approval. Just because something or someone is gay doesn't make it or them right or wrong. That's not the point, though it feels like it has somehow become the point*." [47: p69]
- Third, gay people are human. The Bible does not demonise any single class of humanity. We are all as intrinsically sinful as each other, no better, no worse. "*We are all the same. Vulnerable. Sinful not primarily for moral reasons but because we live in a broken relationship with God. The Bible doesn't shy away from our moral brokenness and mess. And it doesn't condemn us for the brokenness and mess or lock us into unbearable lifestyle options as a result*." [47: p70-71]
- Fourth, many of the Bible texts about same-sex sex that we look at will make a link between idolatry and, in modern language, being gay. In the discussion above we have already seen that Romans 1, in particular, is primarily about idolatry but other texts too make a link between idolatry and being gay. This observation needs to be discussed and we will look at it with Marcus Green's help before we move on from looking at 'Scripture' to thinking about 'Culture' later in this article.

What then might the New Testament have to say about discerning God in the midst of this debate. A few passages may well be of help. ....

a) **Matthew 7**: here we have a passage from the Gospels which encourages us to look for the fruit that is born from the trees of our actions, ideas and teaching .... **Matthew 7** suggests that experience of sound Christian teaching should show good fruit, not bad fruit. ...

"*By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them*." [Matthew 7:16-20]

According to **Matthew 7**, it would seem that if our ideas, actions and theology produce good fruit they are worthy of our attention. If, however the result of our theology is the production of bad fruit, we need to pull back away from that teaching to re-evaluate our choices and our theology. [6]

But does this help? ..... Can we identify appropriate ways of evaluating the good and the bad in this case? Or will this provide just another possibility for disagreement? I am loathed to get into this debate in detail because it seems that attitudes to 'bad' and 'good' are inevitably going to follow the same divisions as the main arguments. However, these questions can actually be one's which draw the church towards new conclusions.

Just two examples of how this might be the case.

First: research, published in the January ***Pediatrics (Vol. 123, No. 1)***, found that LGB adults who reported high rates of parental rejection in their teens were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to have had unprotected sex than LGB peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection, reports the study team, headed by Caitlin Ryan, PhD, of San Francisco State University. [20] This fruit is clearly not good fruit.

I can imagine that those of us who hold a more conservative viewpoint might want to argue that, if this research reflects reality, it is probably an inevitable consequence of parents holding true to Scripture. But is that argument acceptable in the light of the consequences?

Second: my sending church in Didsbury, Manchester, years after I had left to train for ministry in the Church of England, encountered the full impact of their failure to be open to discussions of sexuality on an individual who was gay. The question of where 'good' and 'bad' fruit exist in the following story might help our understanding of the importance of the passage in Matthew 7.

In 2014, 14-year-old Elizabeth (Lizzie) Lowe took her own life because she did not believe she would be accepted at her church as a gay Christian. [21] Since then St James & Emmanuel, Didsbury has been on a journey. In 2018, it formally became an inclusive church - embracing everyone, regardless of gender, race, disability or sexuality. Lizzie's parents believe embracing inclusion could help save the lives of other teenagers.

At Lizzie's inquest, 3 months after her death, the church discovered that their *"'conspiracy of silence' around the issue of sexuality had been the crucible in which Lizzie had existed in those months up until her death.*" [22]

They realised that the issue of sexuality can lead a child or an adult to a point of desperation, and that "*the church, in its own way, whether through ignorance, silence, or through deliberate application of theology, [can create] an environment in which a tragedy like that can take place*." [22]

St. James & Emmanuel was "*a fairly typical, open, Evangelical community where sexuality was just something [not touched or talked] about because ... it was a divisive issue. But when you don't talk about an area like that, it actually begins to close off conversations*." [22]

"*But, as [the church community] began working on inclusion, [it] found that, far from becoming damaged by the process, the church was actually coming to life. People from all over the country and elsewhere have come to [the church] saying 'Tell us about this.' From the tragedy of Lizzie's death, life is not only growing in [St. James & Emmanuel] church community, it's popping up wherever anybody is asking that question. There has been a resurrection out of the tragedy*." [22]

b) **John 4** provides the story of an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. We probably don't need to rehearse what cultural boundaries Jesus chooses to cross in this story. It might be worth considering that the story is actually a commentary on some words spoken to Nicodemus in John 3: 16-17:

"*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*" [John 3:16-17]

Jesus speaks to her gently, without condemnation. He does not shrink from the truth but speaks with true compassion which draws her into relationship with him. Truth is spoken but without condemnation. Her restoration to relationship with Jesus, the healing of her fundamental brokenness is not dependent on the resolution of moral concerns. Jesus does not moralise. There is no instruction "*about how she should behave better, be more upright, get the rules clearer in her head, not screw up*." [47: p72]

I think that we are tempted to read into this story the moralism that we expect to be there. There is nothing of that nature in the story. The welcome from Jesus is unconditional.

c) **Matthew 15:21-28**: The Canaanite woman is all that a Jewish man would have cultural difficulty with! It is unlikely that the disciples are being intentionally cruel but they recommend the restoration of order! "*She is a nuisance. A woman breaking into the men's company, a woman speaking out of turn, a foreigner defiling Jewish purity - does she have no manners at all? Canaanites. What do you expect?*" [47: p77]

The real shock, for me, in this passage is Jesus' words to her. He voices all of the prejudice in the disciples' hearts. Righteous Jews would see her as filthy, immoral, idolatrous and pagan.

Her response is to 'kneel' before Jesus. The word used here is the word Jesus uses for worship (*prosekunei*). [52: p137-140] "*She is not an idolater. Her worship is true.*"[47: p78] Just the crumbs, please Lord, she says, just a little bit of you. Her salvation is secured. For the disciples, she was unacceptable because she was a woman and a Canaanite. After meeting Jesus, "*she was still Canaanite and a woman. But she had changed - because her relationship with God had altered fundamentally. She was now a worshipper in spirit and in truth. We are right to seek repentance - but the sin we have to leave behind is not an arbitrarily chosen moral failure. It is our broken relationship with God. That's the fundamental. Repentance is about idolatry first*." [47: p79]

d) **Other passages in Scripture** make it clear that a paramount concern is ***idolatry*** rather than primarily morality. We see that looking back to the Old Testament, in the focus of the Ten Commandments first on idolatry and God's people's relationship with their God, and later in the words of the prophets. There is a consistent link throughout Scripture between idolatry and sexuality, predominantly heterosexuality. Idolatry is the principal concern and most often it is linked with prostitution and adultery rather than with homosexuality. [47: p90]

We continue to see this concern over idolatry in many of the stories/parables in the gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament, for example:

- The Rich Young Man (Mark 10:17-31) places his goods in the highest place in his life. The Kingdom of God and following Jesus have been displaced by a particular idolatry - the love of possessions. [47: p87-88]
- Levi or Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13) is someone who has placed monetary gain above allegiance to his faith. When he responds to Jesus' call, he walks away from his role as a tax collector and in doing so places Jesus first in his life. But this does not mean that he has to give up on his friends. Jesus is immediately seen dining with tax collectors like Matthew and other sinners. The Pharisees reaction makes it clear that Jesus has no moral agenda, he is happy to be there. Matthew is now in right relationship with Jesus. That is enough. [47: p84-85]

e) **1 Corinthians 5 & 6**: This is an interesting example!

First for the action of the translators who revised the NIV, people of our culture, who made a choice to alter the translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 from the original 'male prostitutes' (*malakoi*) and 'homosexual offenders' (*arsenokoitai*), to 'men who have sex with men'. What purports to be a translation is, at least here, only a paraphrase. It is a paraphrase which reveals the conservative evangelical cultural assumptions made by translators about the two Greek words in brackets above. Contemporary culture can directly affect our understanding of Scripture at the most basic level of the translation of the text, let alone the interpretation of it.

The earlier translation is referring, in all probability, to sex workers and predators. If this is the case, there is a world of difference between those meanings and a phrase which essentially refers to 'persons who are sexually active'.

Green says that within "*our culture, with our conflict over the place of homosexuality in life and in the Church, this is a very active theological choice ... because the text in 1 Corinthians 6:11 goes on to say: 'And that is what some of you were.*'" [47:108-109]

Not all gays are prostitutes and predators, but the translators have encouraged readers of the NIV to make that judgement. This, to me, is a shocking reality. I thought that we could trust translators to give us the best rendering of the text. But, at least here, that has proven not to be the case. It is

shocking, but it is an excellent example of the way in which our culture can dictate the way we approach Scripture. Any translation is somewhat speculative. Basing discussion on the revised NIV text would be an error of judgment. [28: p135]

If we approach these two chapters with care then we will see what Paul's agenda is. Once again, we will note that we are not in the midst of teaching about Christian attitudes to homosexuality. Chapter 5 appears to start with a problem of heterosexual misbehaviour, continues with a reminder that Paul has taught them to dissociate themselves from those who are sexually immoral. Notice that this is an issue within the Church family (5:11-12) not among outsiders. In the two chapters Paul lists wrongdoing three times, each seemingly building on the first list and each strengthening his point that immorality and idolatry are not to be part of a Christian life and should not be tolerated by the Christian community. It is not a treatise on homosexuality. It is about all that has been left behind. Which does include male prostitution and offences such as rape of a man by a man.

Paul is nothing but consistent, "*he uses his usual caricatures, his usual hyperbole to remind them: Christians are called to a higher standard than those around them*." [47: p111-112] We are back with his point in Romans 1 which, just to remind us, is about idolatry. The sin of the world is idolatry, manifested in a while variety of ways.

There is a trajectory of hope in Scripture. "*In Leviticus, two men lying together were a sign of idolatry, being like pagans, abandoning God and being worthy of the death penalty. In Paul, certain homosexual acts (that's the clearest we can get we don't really know what kind of acts, and he says nothing at all of relationships) are equated with idolatry but so is virtually everything else (from greed to gossip to slander to adultery moral sins which are not respecters of sexual orientation) and it is the linking of all these moral failures with the greater sin of idolatry that really exercises Paul - and yet still Jesus is there for all*." [47: p113]

We have a question to answer which the Bible does not ask directly, and so does not answer directly: "*What happens when my heart belongs to Jesus, when I worship him in Spirit and truth, genuinely, and have therefore put aside idolatry and with it immorality, swindling, gossiping, ... disobeying my parents, ... but find I still love deeply someone else of the same gender and want to commit to being with them? Do the moral details of Romans 1 or Romans 2 or the prostitutes and predators of 1 Corinthians 6 speak to my situation any more than Leviticus 20? In short: are the acts of idolatry the only acts possible for gay people? Is the choice between idolatry and abstinence the Bible's only s*tory?*"* [47*:* 114]

Or, might a trajectory of hope extend forward from the canon of Scripture towards the present day? This question takes us back to the fleeting mention of Matthew 8 earlier in this article.

f) **Matthew 8:5-13** is the story of an encounter between a Roman centurion and Jesus. It contains the acknowledgement by Jesus of the manifest faith of the centurion and almost gushing positive comments about the centurion's place in the story of faith! It is a story of the healing of a slave who may well have been close to death. It is also the story of a man who loved his slave enough to approach Jesus and to ask for the healing of the slave.

Green asks us to consider that the story is one of a human being being healed but not freed. After the slave's healing he remained "*a chattel, a thing (however prized). Less than a person. Legally a belonging*." [47: p115] He then suggests an alternative way of thinking, not as a firm interpretation of the passage, rather 'a nod towards a possibility'.

The story appears in both Luke (Luke 7:1-10) and Matthew: "*Luke calls the slave a 'doulos', a slave. Matthew calls him a 'pais', a boy. Matthew's word is sometimes used of the junior partner in a gay relationship in the military - a hierarchical relationship, but not necessarily an abusive one as we might suppose in our culture. Again, we need to make sure our cultural references aren't tainting our*

view; it was a hierarchical relationship but not a hidden one. Was it perfect? Who knows? But the depth of feelings involved caused an army officer to risk reputation and standing by begging a religious leader from an oppressed nation to help. Is it possible? Is it thinkable that Jesus restores not a 'thing' to be used, but a person to be loved?" [47: p115]

Green asks us what our response to that possibility is. Would we rather the boy was a slave or in a loving gay relationship? Our answer to that question says something significant about us. It highlights the key argument between those who hold a traditional position and those who see this as one further scriptural possibility of a positive attitude towards people in a kind of gay relationship in Scripture.

"*Jesus welcomes the woman at the well, the Canaanite woman with the sick daughter, Zacchaeus the quisling tax collector, the centurion with the fondness for his slave,the bandit on the next cross - and he welcomes them because they are people. Human beings. There are no social, political, cultural, gender or religious barriers that keep us from him or make us a second-tier moral underclass in his sight*." [47: 117]

g) **Ephesians 2:11-20** is "*a wonderful song gifted to us by St. Paul that every excluded person everywhere needs to sing out proudly*." [47: p133]

It affirms that, says Green, "*Christ has broken down every barrier, ... we have been brought near to God by Jesus. By Jesus. Not by rules and by the permissions of people. ... He is breaking down walls of hostility between us, conquering oceans of misunderstanding, creating a whole new humanity because all have access to God through his Spirit. So we're not less. We are citizens, family members, ... we are part of this story*." [47: 134]

A few final words on Scripture: I promised to come back to the link in the sexuality language of the Scriptures between idolatry and being gay. Marcus Green faces the issue directly and without ambiguity and offers three options for us to consider:

- ***this makes our discussion about idolatry effectively irrelevan***t. If you are gay by nature (over which modern knowledge and the understanding of the majority of the Church in the UK agree) then you are ultimately and essentially unredeemable. If this is the case, that "*being gay stops you having a right worshipping relationship. ... Why is this nowhere fully explored, and why in Romans when St. Paul takes up the reversing of the broken relationship does he not do so pointing out that are people who by their nature or lifestyle have placed themselves beyond the reach of the gospel love of Christ*." [47: p81-82]
- ***the link is irrelevant***. if we follow this argument, we will ultimately agree that Scripture is out of touch with the modern world. We will be saying that, beyond reminding us that we should value all and fight for justice, Scripture is silent about faithful, loving monogamous same-sex relationships. Yes, Scripture does have something vital to say about justice but it seems to me that it has much more to say, and that it is just not good enough, or loyal enough to God's Word to treat the link which the Bible makes between idolatry and sexuality irrelevant or impotent.
- ***the link is real and must be addressed***. This is actually what we have been thinking about in this article. The link is there, but as we have already noted, there are far more references which link heterosexual behaviour with idolatry. "*It isn't a question of gay or straight. The Bible links being gay with idolatry; but it also links being straight with idolatry. ... The Bible links being human with idolatry. ... We are all subject to the same brokenness*." [47: p93]

So, my final words on Scripture, at least for now. Or perhaps I should say final words ***from*** Scripture, come from Paul's letter to the Galatians which reminds us that as far as the gospel is concerned we are all the same: ...

"*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*." [Galatians 3:28]

Even though 'straight' and 'gay' are not mentioned in this verse, nor is orientation addressed in Scripture, the intent in Paul's mind in the context is to explain that in Christ we are not separated out in that kind of way. We are all one.

However, there is a need to explore these final words a little! Sorry. This is beginning to feel like the 'and finally' of an interminable sermon which itself is only an indication that the sermon will end sometime.

Traditionalists argue that straight/gay is a moral distinction like righteous/sinful, that it is not like the other issues which are mentioned in Galatians 3:28. But this view fails to engage fully with Scripture. The Greek word translated 'Greek' is '*ethnes*'. It is the same word as used in Galatians 2:15-16: "*We ourselves are Jews by birth not Gentile sinners."* It seems as though if you are not a Jew, you are by 'nature' a sinner. *"The division between Jews and Gentiles isn't racial. ... It isn't about morality. ... It's rather about the very heart of sin. ... Idolatry*." [47: p123-124]

Christ has broken down every barrier and in doing so, he has made us (those who worship in Jesus as Lord) one in Him.

The Question of Culture

We now move on to think about 'culture'. The Bishops of the Anglican Church of Japan (Nippon Seikokai, NSKK) when responding to the Windsor Report, [80] said, among other things, that "*while the NSKK believes in the authority of the Scriptures, we understand that the text of Scripture was formed within a particular historical and faith context. Accordingly, we believe that, in a context which differs both in history and the expression of faith, we are actually permitted a variety of ways of interpreting Scripture. ... We cannot think that the church can have only one absolute view of human sexuality. While recognising the authority of the Bible, there is every possibility that in the process of working out its message, differences of time and culture may be reflected in the understanding of human sexuality. We would like to think of the series of decisions and actions of ECUSA (the Episcopal Church of the USA) and ACC (the Anglican Church of Canada) [81] in this light. ... [The] NSKK does not think that unity can be manifested only if we take the same interpretation of Scripture and the same theological standpoint concerning our basic understanding of human sexuality*." [82: p112]

As we have looked at Scripture, we have also found ourselves thinking about 'culture'. In the debate about biblical ethics, it is sometimes assumed that the Bible and 'culture' are diametrically opposed: we are urged to hold on to 'biblical' values in order to resist cultural assimilation. The truth is that "*what you see depends in part on where you are standing and on what you expect to see*." [28: p23] The Japanese Bishops highlight this in their reply to the Windsor Report above.

"*Cultural questions don't only come from the first century. Sometimes we have to recognise that we are more affected than we think by ways of seeing things that are given to us within our own setting in our own time*." [47: p105] We have a common cultural background in the UK. Part of that background is that, until very recently, homosexual acts between consenting adults were illegal and most people saw this as a reflection of biblical morality. It was 'normal'. It went unquestioned. [47: p106]

It is also the case that both cultural views and the views of the Church change with time. Sometimes over a long period of time. It would seem likely that the same would be true throughout the period when the Scriptures were being written. Just one example of changes over time will suffice for our present purposes. Take just one as an example: the understanding of marriage in society and the

Church. It is worth spending a little time on this as it is illustrative of the way in which society, culture and theology have inevitably intermingled in the history of the UK, demonstrating something of the dynamics of change which affect the development of theological views within the Church in the UK and around the world.

In a short essay, Jessica Martin provides an overview of the way in which understandings of marriage have developed. [89]

In today's world, "*Christians understand marriage to be at the heart of human sexual relations. Most people who accept this think it quite natural, then, to find marriage also near the centre of a Christian vision for a peaceful and ordered society. For many this is reinforced by a powerful biblical symbol of marriage at the heart of church order: Christ's relationship to his Church is understood mystically as a bridegroom's to his bride, a husband's to his wife*." [89: p62]

The two themes - Christian marriage at the heart of social stability and understanding it mystically in the relationship of Christ to his Church - "*seem to belong together, to reinforce each other. Theologies based around them are powerful and influential, apparently seamless. But they are, in this particular form, a relatively recent - even local - phenomenon in the story of Christianity*." [89: p62]

The phrase 'bride of Christ' was once primarily related to the 'celibate' and 'virgin' life, and celibacy often opened a door to relatively easy living in the monasteries of the day. As late as the early 1500s, "*when worldly and Christian values intertwined in every part of living, ... marriage was socially important ... monogamy was a matter of real importance for wives, because it was the only way ... for a landed man to ensure ... true biological descendants*." [89: p62-63]

Marital arrangements had little to do with religion, the Church sanctioned every marriage but Church structures had nothing else to do with marriage. All clergy were celibate, the Church and monasteries were very powerful nationally and locally. Becoming a nun was often the only way an upper-class woman could "*gain power, learning and some degree of autonomy ... this avoiding being helpless bargaining counters for their families' dynastic ambitions*." [89: p64]

For ordinary people at the beginning of the 16th century, marriage was an instrument for inheritance, safeguarded female chastity and reduced widespread problems of bastardy. "*Legalities surrounding marriages were quite relaxed for most ordinary people. Betrothals, or 'handfastings', as they were sometimes called, although legally binding, didn't need witnesses (though witnesses were naturally felt to be highly desirable by the courts trying disputed cases): the couple pledged themselves to each other. If the case came to court it was one person's word against another's. This could matter a lot for a woman, as a reasonable percentage of couples had sex on the strength of the betrothal, and if the man went back on his agreement the woman might well have the shame of a bastard child and no means of support. In luckier circumstances, pregnancy could well be what finished the courting process and moved the couple on to actually getting married. It was - if you were a woman - a gamble for stability, with high stakes. The usual reason for breaking a betrothal was to do with worldly goods- if, for example, the woman turned out to have less to bring to a marriage than the man had hoped for. On the other hand, if you were poor, pregnancy might be what brought your man up to scratch, and therefore looked worth the risk*." [89: p64]

Marriage was a sacrament, presided over by a priest at the door of the church but it was the words said by the couple which cemented the arrangement, not anything said by the priest. Marriage was of lesser importance than baptism and extreme unction as it was not necessary for salvation. Nuns and priests were considered closer to God than other men and women.

Thirty years later this began to change when Henry VIII declared himself head of the Church of England and sanctioned his own divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Marriage was removed from the list of sacraments, seemingly being reduced in importance. But at the same time "*marriage was creeping up towards being the spiritual centre of Christian living - for various reasons. One was the*

Europe-wide campaign among its opponents to discredit the celibate system upon which the Roman Catholic Church was based, sometimes conducted through accusations of monetary corruption, but more often and more scurrilously through insinuations of the wicked uncontrolled sexual licence enjoyed by celibates. ... Marriage, by contrast with celibacy, was seen as a controllable vehicle for sexual expression as well as being socially stable. That is to say, it was supposed to ensure fewer bastards, but it also marked out the area in which sexual activity of any kind was sanctioned. In insisting that children were a marriage's main point, it made the relatively low status of mutual sexual enjoyment very plain while at the same time insisting that sexual activity within marriage would go far to regulate lust which would otherwise find less controlled, less visible and more disturbing outlets." [89: p66]

Marriage had also become identified with government of both State and Church as the King was a married man and power in the church would henceforth descend via marriage and a hereditary line. Incidentally, secular marriage (not witnessed by clergy) became possible for the first time in the republican Commonwealth. Under the monarchy, "*marriage's spiritual and political dimensions, the association of marriage as an institution with the familial model of monarchial spiritual government, were closely intertwined*." [89: p67]

Betrothals without witnesses were increasingly frowned upon. "*Marriages ... were conducted inside churches, no longer at the door. ... The ceremony and the ecclesiastical safeguards surrounding it, tightened." [XX: p67] Marriage's importance was increasingly emphasised as the centuries passed, marriage "had replaced its sacramental status with a powerful legal one: the Church was taking seriously it's job of social regulation*." [89: p67]

"*Although children were seen as marriage's primary point, there had been another important change at the Reformation: the conscious modelling of marriage as a basis for a loving spiritual and physical partnership. This was a German import. When Cranmer was revising the wedding service he asked the advice of his friend Martin Bucer, who suggested a third reason for matrimony to go into the wedding service, along with the procreation of children and the avoidance of fornication: 'the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other. This companionate model for marriage was new; implicitly, it was a very different kind of reason for tying the knot from the other two, which were negative (that's to say, they averted evils) and practical. ... Its introduction was extremely important, laying a foundation for seeing marriage as modelling the ideal relationship between man and woman, God and his people, Christ and his Church, a man and his family, a monarch and his country. In these related models the egalitarian mutuality of companionate love was becoming blended with a hierarchy based on obedience. Together they made a powerful alloy. They also, for the first time, made explicit an assumption that physical bonds might have an important spiritual aspect - and raised therefore the converse possibility, that spiritual bonds might well have a physical aspect. Married love and intimate friendship moved closer together than ever before; but they remained within their hierarchical frame*." [89: p69]

By the mid-17th century, "*spiritual companionship and mental compatibility had become central to a religious view of marriage. This is a trend which has only intensified in the years which have followed, until modern views, including those held by Christians, take it as axiomatic that healthy marriages are primarily companionate. Children and their legitimacy, and the avoidance of fornication, are subordinate reasons. They are about social stability rather than being at the heart of what the marriage is. ... What reasonable or decent person would dream of defining a childless marriage as less 'real' than one which had produced offspring? But we are all in agreement that a non-companionate marriage has something fundamental missing*." [89: p70]

Biblical views of marriage, as a system for inheritance and bringing-up of children have a lot to do with how it has turned out. Women are seen, generally, as inferior to men. The Old Testament is more concerned about women taking more than one sexual partner than men. The companionship element is a newer interpretation which can point back to some biblical warrant in the 'cleaving' and 'becoming

one flesh' of the creation stories. This high view of companionship in marriage is an ideal espoused by the church today but which only entered its vocabulary after discussions between Cranmer and Bucer.

Marriage has developed over time both in theology and society and may well continue to develop over time. The changes in society and thology have been interwoven.

In most areas of life change has occurred and the Church has had to adapt, sometimes in a matter of less than a century. Similar gradual changes or major shifts in perspective (see our earlier discussion towards the top of this article) will also have occurred in the centuries over which the various books of our Bibles were being written.

Loveday Alexander reminds us that, "*the Bible reflects the cultural contexts of its writers just as much as we reflect our own — and with just the same range of dissonance and congruence that we find in contemporary debates. (That's because the Bible was written by real people, wrestling with the challenge of articulating God's word and discovering God's will in real, complex situations.) And this means that in order to understand Paul, [for instance,] we have to take the time and trouble to understand him in his own context, to hear what he is saying in his own terms and not rush to assimilate him to the concepts of a very different world*." [4: p36]

This careful work is a particularly important step in the process of applying scripture in our own context. In order for our exegesis to have integrity, we have to consider how Paul (and each other writer) fits into the cultural patterns of his day, and we have to ask, in this particular instance, how same-sex activity was seen in Paul's social world and the social worlds of the other writers. Ultimately this is about integrity in interpretation rather than just reading the words as they appear on the page.

"*Sexuality is not a term used in the Bible; it is an overarching interpretive concept that has arisen in modern culture and serves to organise human experience in a particular way*." [28: p25] Things such as gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires and fantasies are all linked together under the term 'sexuality', which is our culture's way of making sense of our experience. They don't have to be linked in this way and in other cultures have not been. [41: p15]

Martin Vasey says that social order in the different cultures of antiquity changed as they developed. An initially 'family-based' culture changed as cities arose and grew. [28: p27-30] Roles and relationships became separated and diversified. "*The book of Proverbs reflects a more urban culture ... In the main, Proverbs is concerned with a male and public world but it gives glimpses of a complementary realm for the women of similar social standing in its society*." [28: p29]

There were two complementary gendered social worlds when Proverbs was written and this was true of "*most societies, tribal or urban, before the emergence of modern industrial capitalism. It meant that an individual had to negotiate his or her relationship with two social worlds, both gendered*." [28: p29]

Without, hopefully, generalising too much, people in the 'West' live in a culture which is based on very different assumptions. Ivan Illich & M.Boyers say that modern industrial society is based on '*genderless economics*' [42: p178] Generally, human creative activity (work, rather than hobbies) "*has been removed from the home into a public realm ruled by economic considerations and in which individuals are treated as genderless units of labour*." [28: p30] This effectively resulted in 'family' being seen as a humane refuge from society and in domestic life being seen as the place of religion, emotion, culture and humanity. Public life was the place of rational, scientific and economic reality. [28: p31]

Until recently, Westerners were living in a world which essentially accepted that the qualities associated with masculinity became normative for all humanity. "*Men came to see themselves as the 'normal' human being*." [28: p31]

This removal of gender from the public realm resulted in a particular shaping of our notion of 'sexuality'. The public realm being seen as gender-neutral results in gender being 'relegated' to the home, even to the bedroom. A result has been the way in which "*sensitivity to male beauty and emotional attraction or tenderness between men are directed to the residual realm in which they can be explored, to the sphere of sexuality - home and bed*." [28: p32]

We could continue to follow Martin Vasey's argument through to a conclusion but I don't believe that to be necessary as his point has been made, that the concepts we use to define our world (such as 'sexuality') are themselves culturally derived and conditioned. It is difficult for us to think outside of those concepts and categories. And it follows that this must also have been the case for Paul. It is therefore incumbent on us to take great care so as to avoid allowing our cultural assumptions to govern our ethical assessment of behaviour. And we must take similar care to avoid allowing, what were, Paul's cultural assumptions to govern our thinking. [28: p32-37]

Marcus Green also cautions us about making links between Bible passages without first considering whether these links are made as a result of our own cultural understanding rather than actually being legitimate. For instance, "*St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6 are linked with Leviticus 20 in our theological debates. Technical descriptions are given of the sexual terms used. [56] It's said that the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament uses the same words [57] as St. Paul. The argument is made that what Leviticus forbids, the New Testament forbids. Simple: gay is bad*." [47: p107]

Loveday Alexander explains that, "*Paul shares the moral perception of other Jewish writers of his day that homosexual practice was a specifically Gentile vice, which was peculiarly abhorrent to Judaism. ... The rejection of same-sex activity as a quintessentially 'Gentile' vice is a theme developed by post-biblical Jewish writers such as Philo (an older contemporary of Paul). In words strongly reminiscent of Paul's language in Romans, the Wisdom of Solomon (Wisdom 14:22-27) traces all the corruptions of Gentile society (including its sexual corruption) to the basic sin of idolatry. Paul's anthropology of desire is shaped by his particular cultural location as a first-century Diaspora Jew living in a Gentile world*." [4: p36] [18: p89-102]

"*In the Greco-Roman world, attitudes to homosexual behaviour were more complex and ambivalent than we might think. Greek culture (as is well known) was much more tolerant of same-sex relationships than Jewish culture."* [4: p37] Loveday Alexander highlights the 'Platonic' ideal of *"a loving and formative relationship between the adolescent beloved (eromenos), a young boy aged between 11 and 17, and the adult lover or erastes, typically (though not solely) an adult male in his twenties. But these relationships were strongly controlled by cultural codes designed to protect the honour of both parties and ensure that they did not forfeit their status as elite males*." [4: p37] The relationship was unequal, temporary, transient and not exclusive. "*It was framed on the assumption that older partner took the 'active' (i.e. masculine) role and the younger the 'passive' (i.e. feminine) role. It was not permanent: as the adolescent matured he was expected to graduate into the role of erastes and seek out his own, younger eromenos. And it was not exclusive: adult elite males were expected, as a civic duty, to marry and father children, and keep them safe at home. "Same-sex relationships belonged to a masculine social world from which wives were excluded, but where elite married men could continue to enjoy a variety of social and sexual relationships outside marriage, both with boys and with concubines, slaves and courtesans*." [4: p37] [18: p57-88]

"*Elite Roman males were expected to marry and bear children, but continued to enjoy a range of sexual relationships, within and without marriage. Adultery was a legal offence: but this meant having a sexual relationship with another man's wife, that is with a woman who belonged to another elite male. Having a sexual relationship with a social inferior — male or female slaves, dependents or prostitutes — did not count as adultery: this was simply a normal expression of adult male power, especially within the household. But, on the whole, conservative Roman morality frowned on same-sex relationships, especially for adult men who were regarded as taking a 'passive' ('feminine') role that belonged to social inferiors. Slaves and rent-boys (it was implied) had no choice, but for a free*

adult male to take such a role was regarded as 'unnatural:' it was seriously damaging to his elite status." [4: p37]

Loveday Alexander continues: "*These cultural patterns form the underlying framework of the Pauline same-sex texts. Paul's distinction between 'active' and 'passive' partners in a same-sex relationship, and his distaste for the 'effeminate' male, reflect the perceptions of Greco-Roman culture — as does his conviction that long hair in a man is 'unnatural' (1 Corinthians 11.14). In this he is no different from other Greco-Roman writers of his day, who use similar language to describe same-sex relationships. But Paul also takes over cultural perceptions from his Jewish environment, like the argument that sexual immorality is a result of idolatry*." [4: p38]

"*Paul's reading of same-sex relations thus reflects the cultural scripts of his own culture. Starting from the fundamental perception that same-sex proclivity is a voluntary moral choice exercised by heterosexual people, ancient moralists saw it as an expression of violent and excessive sexual desire (pathos) — itself morally reprehensible, and frequently used as an expression of domination over social inferiors or subjugated enemies. It represented an 'unnatural' confusion of gender roles, and thus a distortion of the social hierarchies built into marriage and household. It belonged to the shadow-world of extra-marital sexual relations, thus necessarily unfaithful, impermanent, uncommitted; and was most likely to be encountered in the form of prostitution or abuse within the household. ... In the Roman world (and especially in the mercantile/artisan urban circles in which Paul moved), same-sex relationships were most likely to be with rent-boys or with household slaves. In other words, Paul doesn't condemn long-term, faithful same-sex relationships, for the simple reason that he doesn't know them: the homosexual activity he knows falls under the category porneia ('bad sex') because it is either abusive (abuse within the family unit, including slave-rape) or commercially exploitative (prostitution)*." [4: p38]

Vasey asks us to remember that in the cultural environments that shaped the various texts from Scripture that we have looked at in this article, "*the public face of homosexuality was the hungry, idolatrous assertiveness of 'normal' masculinity. There may have been individuals whose homosexual activity had a different source, but the conceptualization of same sex activity bracketed them with an out-of-control masculinity that refused to remain satisfied with sexual relations with women*." [28: p139]

It is true that "*the emergence of a public gay identity since the eighteenth century has created a very different situation. The public face of homosexuality is now associated with those who - for whatever reason find themselves unable to accommodate to the robust 'heterosexual' masculinity of the culture, to the suppression of public affection outside the home, and to the culture's identification of desire and 'heterosexual' domesticity*." [28: p139-140]

Gay identity today, following this train of thought, "*is not about proud rebellion against God but arises from the sensitivity of certain vulnerable individuals to certain truths of creation suppressed in the wider culture. The church then faces the dilemma that when it presents itself as the primary opposition to this public gay identity, it is opposing the form of homosexuality which is least easily identified with St. Paul's strictures. It finds itself as an agent of oppression and social condemnation to a group of people whose ears may be open both to the mystery of God's creation and to the gentle call of Christ*." [28: p140]

The counter from a traditionalist perspective would be that "*under no circumstances can the church compromise with a social institution which itself appears to compromise some of the deepest scriptural affirmations about human beings*." [28: p140] A possible reply to this statement "*would be to quote St Paul's, 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters' (Colossians 3:22). New Testament ethical exhortation so accepted the imperfect social arrangements of its culture that many 'biblical' Christians were confident that the Bible supported slavery*." [28: p140][68: p31-37]

"*The biblical treatment of slavery witnesses both to the problems of applying scripture across different cultures and to the place of social pragmatism in working out obedience to Christ*." [28: p140]

Having listened to the narrative above, we must allow for other voices to be heard as we reflect on what was understood in the cultures surrounding the writers of the Old Testament and the New Testament.

John Pike [29] has undertaken a survey of available material relating to historic forms of same-sex relationships. He says: "*When one looks at the biblical texts that refer to same gender sexual behaviour, it is important to try and understand exactly what acts took place at various stages of history and to ask whether the biblical writers were aware of the acts and types of relationships that we now know existed. Were those writers aware of people who we now refer to as lesbian, gay or bisexual? Why are the acts condemned? Did the biblical condemnations apply to people in loving relationships then and, if so, do they still apply to those types of relationships today?*" [29]

In his article, John Pike highlights times in history when it is possible that biblical writers could have been aware of loving same-sex sexual relationships. There are references relating to the Ancient Near East and Israel which "*suggest that occasional homoerotic contacts were tolerated, on a consensual or contractual basis.* [30: p159] *Some references suggest that there may have been truly loving relationships*." [29][31: p48, 50, 77][18: p24. cf. 32: p113]

"*Very few extant texts inform us of what [cultic] homoerotic practices occurred in the times that Leviticus and Deuteronomy were written.* [30: p158-159] *Martti Nissinen suggests that cultic personalities were asexual rather than homoerotic. However, there is no way of knowing whether the 'assinnu'* [33] *or other cultic personalities were sexually orientated towards other men, and it is highly questionable whether the modern concept of 'homosexuality' is applicable in this context*." [18: p19-36, 39, 41]

Pike comments that "*quite a lot is known about practices and attitudes in the Greco-Roman world between 400 BCE and 400CE, which includes the time of St Paul. ... There were various forms of homoerotic relationship across the Greco-Roman world. There were four broad groups – exploitation, concubinage, lovers (especially pederasty in Greece) and formal unions. ... There were male-male marriages and other formal same-sex unions in both Greece and Rome, and Brooten reports that there were also female-female marriages in parts of Egypt. However, we do not know about the precise nature of these marriages. ... The most common form of same gender relationship in ancient Greece was pederasty, a relationship between a man and a boy. However, there were also voluntary sexual encounters or "one night stands", slave prostitution in the ancient Roman Empire, and 'Effeminate Call Boys', possibly in both ancient Greece and Rome*." [29]

"*Mark D. Smith, Bruce Thornton, William Loader and others state that there were also consensual, loving relationships between adults in classical Greece*." [29][34: p235-7][35: p84] [32: p4-5] [31: p350] [36: p108][37] Pike says that Gagnon "*cites the speech of Callicratidas, the defender of male-male love in the pseudo-Lucianic "Affairs of the Heart" (c. 300 C.E.) and numerous other examples of loving homoerotic relationships in the Greco-Roman world.*" [29]

Pike notes that NT Wright comments that the Ancients: "*knew just as much about [same-sex sexual activity] as we do. In particular, ... they knew a great deal about what people today would regard as longer-term, reasonably stable relations between two people of the same gender*." [38]

"*However, others have disputed that Plato was aware of same-sex unions that were the equivalent of today's same-gender, monogamous partnerships of love and faithfulness, intended to be permanent*." [29][39]

Pike also notes Dover's conclusion: "*So long as we think of the world as divided into homosexuals and heterosexuals and regard the commission of a homosexual act, or even the entertaining of a homosexual desire, as an irrevocable step across a frontier which divides the normal, healthy, sane, natural and good from the abnormal, morbid, insane, unnatural and evil, we shall not get very far in understanding Greek attitudes to homosexuality*." [29][37: p183, 203]

It also appears that there is "*evidence in poetry of genuine love for boys, who were often, against all rules, free born, or even of noble lineage. Cantarella feels that this is evidence for genuine, "homosexual" romantic love*." [29][40: pxviii-xix] Although, in the 21st century, we would probably see this as child abuse.

It is worth noting that "*there are no Latin words for our modern concepts of 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' and very little evidence remains of the practices that helped form the homoerotic 'model' in the century in which Paul lived*." [34: p234]

Pike then asks the questions: "*Were the writers of the biblical texts that refer to homoerotic conduct aware of people with what we now refer to as a homosexual orientation, as opposed to people who chose to have intercourse with someone of the same sex? Were the ancients aware of loving, faithful same gender relationships? If so, did Paul and other writers of the time, both Christian and non-Christian, include such relationships in their condemnations?*" [29] He notes that scholarly opinions differ on these questions.

"*Scholars generally agree* [as we have already observed] *that the ancients (Biblical, Jewish, Assyrian, Greek or Roman) did not understand 'homosexual orientation' or 'homosexuals' in the sophisticated way we understand these ideas today, at least without significant qualification, and there was no word corresponding to 'homosexuality', 'heterosexuality' or 'bisexuality' in Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic. However, some scholars from both the conservative and progressive sides make a number of qualifications to the general view*." [29]

Pike looks at a number of these different qualifications before commenting that the evidence shows that "*Christian and non-Christian views of homoeroticism were very similar, and that medical views (some of them very strange) influenced the views of early Christians such as Tertullian. Also, the views of moral disgust which Paul expressed were very similar to those articulated by astrologers (some of them contemporaries of Paul) and medical writers of just a century or two later. Paul's views in Romans 1 of homoeroticism being due to idolatry are also seen in the female homoerotic love spells dating from just a few centuries later in Egypt*." [29]

Pike continues: "*Many scholars believe that St Paul himself would have been aware of people who were naturally attracted to people of the same-sex, and who formed loving relationships or even formal unions, but we cannot be certain about this, since most of the materials we have were neither precisely contemporaneous nor originating in places where he worked, and none are directly related to him. Some of the manifestations of homoeroticism that Paul would probably have been familiar with, including paedophilia, pederasty and prostitution (especially with slaves), are very far removed from loving, committed, faithful gay relationships today. However, although Paul does not specifically exclude loving relationships from his teaching in Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 (if it is indeed by him), a key point, as Preston Sprinkle and others note, is that for St Paul and many of his contemporaries, same gender sexual behaviour was "contrary to nature" and was therefore not tolerated in any circumstances.*" [29]

It is clear that the jury is still out on whether Paul did know, or might have known of loving, faithful and monogamous same-sex sexual relationships. Even if there were such relationships, they clearly were not widespread or normative. However, if we are to accept that, for Paul, same-sex sex is 'contrary to nature' and if we are to accept this for ourselves, we need to have a clear idea what we mean when we talk about 'nature' and what is 'natural'.

Vasey comments that many modern people tend to organise their thinking about this "*around two poles of thought. At one pole there is nature which is fixed and associated with the physical, biological and scientific; for Christians this tends to be associated with what God has given in creation. At the other pole there is society which is variable and linked with a shifting kaleidoscope of social arrangements, cultures and fashions; for many Christians this is the realm in which sin is operative, corrupting God's good creation. ...* [But] *the idea of the natural as fixed and the cultural as variable is too simple. Concepts of fixed and natural norms are quickly threatened by any comparison between different societies. The Chinese eat dogs and the French horses; most English people would categorize such behaviour as unnatural. In the realm of sexual practices the same variety quickly appears. Many people in the West view deep kissing, contraception or oral sex as part of the natural repertoire of human sexual behaviour. ('The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles' indicated an increasing practice through the twentieth century of oro-genital contact between heterosexual partners*.' [42: p157-158]) *For each of these practices cultures can be found which see the activity as profoundly unnatural. Cultures differ greatly in their attitude to the privacy appropriate to sexual contact; the modern West expects more privacy than many traditional societies have offered. Attitudes to human nakedness and to where nudity is natural also vary widely*." [28: p38-39]

The traditional Christian understanding of sexual behaviour applied in the West from about the 5th century. It was the prevailing opinion of serious Christian moralists until the early part of the 20th century. According to this view, "*sex is about procreation. ... Sexual acts which do not have this possibility are 'sins against nature'. Aquinas identified four: ... bestiality, homosexual sex, non-procreative heterosexual sex, and masturbation. ... They are sins against God himself and a more direct form of rebellion than sins against neighbour, ... more serious than sexual sins within the natural order such as adultery, seduction and rape*." [28: p43-44]

This tradition is suspicious of sexual desire and so the Book of Common Prayer talks of marriage as ' a remedy against sin'. This tradition sees marriage as a form of worldliness rather than godliness. Essentially, the whole of life experience falls into the category of 'worldliness'. Sexual desire had a central, negative place in Christian anthropology. "*Even in marriage, sexual desire was a permanent reminder of humanity's subjection to sin*." [28: p45]

This tradition also tends to make sexual behaviour the touchstone of Christian discipleship. [28: p45] Vasey tells us that the tradition focusses primarily on a male perspective and is addressed primarily to men; there is every possibility - and some evidence - that different perspectives prevailed in the separate world of women. "*John Boswell ... [documents] widespread acceptance of homosexual desire and behaviour among Christians until about the thirteenth century despite official enactments*." [43]

The 20th century has seen the development of a different system for understanding sexual acts and relations. Sexual activity is now seen as essentially good and associated with relationship rather than procreation. Sexual feeling is viewed more positively. Sexual need is widely accepted. Sexual attraction has become the major basis for domestic life. "*Clear thought about homosexuality does involve recognising the extent of the shift that recent Christian thought has made and in which ' conservative' Christianity is thoroughly implicated*." [28: p47]

The result of this developing theology is significant. Vasey comments: "*If bodily and sexual acts have to be understood in the light of the social structures and symbolic systems which give them meaning, then Christians cannot simply read off rules of sexual behaviour either from the text of scripture or from the 'facts' of human biology. Attention has to be given to the various cultures in scripture and to modern conceptual framework*s." [28: p48]

Vasey suggests that this means that we have to ask how one is to decide that either a particular practice or cultural system is contrary to the will of God. As Christians we have to try to assess these

matters "*in the light of certain great truths of revelation - in particular the goodness and order of creation, the fact if human sin, and the good news if the new creation in Jesus Christ*. [And we have also to relate a] *practice or culture to particular texts of scripture*." [28: p48] Where relevant, his comments in relation to particular verses/passages of scripture appear in the discussion above.

It is worth looking at few other issues. We have already encountered, even if only briefly, the first of these.

Nature and Culture:

'Natural' is an interesting word. one of the clear arguments deployed by those of us who favour a traditional position, is that gay sex is not 'natural'. The word is loaded with a particular moral meaning. But, it is not a word that easily lends itself to a moral agenda. The term 'natural' can be used in a confusing number of ways, 'natural' can:

- be contrasted with "'*nurture' - our biological inheritance versus the experience we gain over the course of our lives*." [90: p215]
- be contrasted with "'*synthetic' – things that arise from the non-human world versus things that arise from human activity*." [90: p215]
- "*refer to what is widespread and 'normal' rather than unusual or exceptional*." [90: p215]
- "*refer to what seems normal or unremarkable within a particular culture*." [90: p215]
- "*refer to something that contributes to physical and mental well-being, ... currently measured by a variety of medical sciences*." [90: p215]
- "*refer to the purpose for which God made something, as opposed to purposes that run against God's plan*." [90: p215][91]
- "*mean 'practically reasonable' as indicating what would appear to be self-evidently true and ethically good*." [90: p216]

"*It is all too easy for discussion to slip from one of these to another. We might start, perhaps, by talking about something that seems normal to members of our culture. We might slip into talking as if that was a biological rather than a cultural fact - an immutable law of nature. And then we might slip further into talking about it as a theological fact, asserting that this is obviously the way God intended creation to work. ... It may be that the distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' is, in our context, not a very helpful way of naming the real question that we face*." [90: p216] The question must be asked, then, as to whether Paul uses the word 'natural' to make a moral judgement?

We can find an answer in Romans. When Paul is talking about Jews and Gentiles in Romans 11, he uses the word 'natural' (11:21). the imagery is "*rife with overtones of righteousness and idolatry, ... but a ... superior judgement of others' sexual behaviour ... is simply absent*." [47: p125] 'Natural' refers, in this example, to being of the same root stock. the Gentiles who are 'unnatural' seem to be being grafted onto the vine that is God's people. There is no implied judgement that Jews are better than Gentiles ('natural' superior to 'unnatural'), Romans is ultimately clear that all have sinned (3:23 again). It is possible that Paul's use of 'natural' in Romans 1:26-27 does not necessarily carry a sense of judgment.

'Nature', in our debates about homosexuality is often juxtaposed with 'Culture'. It appears to be another dynamic like natural/unnatural. 'Nature' seems to be seen as a firm and steady property, as opposed to 'Culture' which is transient and fallible.

I think that when we have deployed an argument which depends on 'Nature' having innate superiority over 'Culture' we might well not be doing justice to the biblical doctrine of Creation. Michael Vasey puts it like this: "*The biblical doctrine relates 'Man' - the human race personified as an individual - to God and to the rest of creation. 'Man' is part of nature and at the same time a little 'god' within it. It is part of our nature to order, understand and to create. Nature (creation) waits for humanity's*

creativity to bring it to perfection, falls into decay as humanity abandons its divine calling, and views the coming of Jesus with joy and hope. ... Human culture is not to be contrasted with nature; although it may be dreadfully marred by sin, is part of the nature (creation) that God has made." [28: p49]

'Culture' is an aspect of human nature. We attain "*maturity within a community which has its own corporate commitments and customs. ... Scripture clearly treats both communities and individuals as morally responsible and accountable to God. Individual self-righteousness is an illusion, partly because we are all implicated in the rebellion and unrighteousness of our culture*." [28: p50] Vasey points to a few Old Testament passages which illustrate this (Jeremiah 5:1-5, 30-31; Ezekiel 9:4; 1 Kings 21:1-7), and comments that, "*For many purposes the primary moral unit is less the individual than the community. In the Old Testament the prophetic denunciations of Israel and of the nation's treat whole communities as the moral agents. The same phenomenon is found in the New Testament, for example, where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41ff) or denounces the Galilean towns for their failure to repent (Matthew 11:20-24).*" [28: p51]

'Culture' is not negative *per se*. As we have already seen, it can be a vehicle which challenges us to return to the Scriptures with new questions. It can be the catalyst which God uses to bring about change. Indeed, this has often been the route through which the Church has discovered God's will. The process of discernment requires the Church to return to the Scriptures for ultimate guidance. Often 'Culture' asks the pertinent questions which prompt careful re-evaluation.

Male Friendship

Affectionate male friendship is a significant feature of Augustine's account of his Christian faith. [58][59] "*Such passionate friendships were a recognised aspect of pre-modern culture and provided a well-understood part of the emotional and affectionate landscape. Affectionate intimacy between men was an accepted and important part of life*." [47: p80-81] It is likely (cf. Plato, The Symposium, p12, 21-27 [60]) that "*the pre-Christian classical tradition of passionate male friendship made no great distinction between friendships that involve sexual intimacy and love that focussed on the physical and moral beauty of the beloved*." [47: p81]

Most of the classical philosophical writing on friendship "*presupposes a sociological context of male-male friendship. Greek writers, such as Plato and Xenophon reporting on Socrates' teaching, discuss 'eros' and 'philia' almost interchangeably to describe the very close relationship between men or between men and boy*s." [62]

Lifelong love and loyalty between men was a feature of the social ideal in Roman culture. [61] In ancient times, men viewed male friendships as "*the most fulfilling relationship a person could have. Friendships were seen as more noble than marital love with a woman because women were seen as inferior*." [63]

It seems as though the boundary lines between relationships of a sexual nature between men and ardent non-sexual relationships were not drawn tightly. Close male relationships in ancient Greco-Roman society could acceptably, stray into being sexual without significant censure.

A very interesting example to consider if we are seeking to gain an understanding of how attitudes to male friendship have changed over centuries can be found in Adam Nicolson's book, *Power and Glory*. Where he seeks to help us to understand the nature of male friendship as it was perceived in the late 16th and early 17th centuries in Britain in the context of the lives of the translators of the King James' Bible. [84: p131-135] There is a clear dissonance between that world and that of Britain in the 21st century. There is such a great difference in cultural perceptions that, if we are not careful, it will result in us reading that culture, and its intentions and meanings, wrongly. It seems appropriate to listen to Adam Nicolson's own words even though this will extend to more than a few paragraphs of text!

Adam Nicolson introduces us to Laurence Chaderton who was a charismatic puritan. He was one of the leading Puritans in Cambridge in the late 16th century. He was the first master of Emmanuel College Cambridge which was founded to prepare Puritans for ministry in the Church of England. It seems that Chaderton:

> "*fostered an astonishingly loving atmosphere at the college. A correspondence from his time as master survives in manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford between two young Emmanuel students who were clearly in love with each other. There is no suggestion of sex but the passion between these boys is unmistakable. One of them, William Sancroft, shared his room with Arthur Bonnest, the son of a minor gentleman from Hertfordshire. They lived together, read together and slept together. Bonnest seems to have contracted TB and gone home.*
>
> *Sancroft wrote to him: 'I had a colleague in my studies, with whom I could communicate both my reading and my doubts. But now I sitt alone. Friendships (as one well said) are but Elemented in an universitie, and soe was ours, but they are best tried in the countrie, in absence I meane'.*
>
> *Bonnest replied: 'Thou are oftener in my thoughts than ever, thou art nearer mee then when I embraced thee. Thou safest thou lovest me: good, well repeat it againe and againe'.*
>
> *And Sancroft wrote back in kind: 'O lett me bosome thee, lett me preserve thee next to my heart and give thee so large an interest there, that nothing may supplant thee'.*
>
> *It isn't known what became of Bonnest. Sancroft, Chaderton's star seedling, later became Archbishop of Canterbury, the only reason this correspondence has been preserved.*
>
> *This extraordinary and passionate atmosphere is one of the governing qualities of the time. The age was at case with un-bridled but apparently quite unsexual love between men. Even Cecil, discussing the intimate relationship between the king and his principal adviser, wrote to a friend: 'As long as any matter of what weight soever, is handled only between the prince and the secretary, those counsels are compared to the mutual affection of two lovers, undiscovered to their friends.'*
>
> *That sense of closeness, of the possibility and richness of an unmediated intimacy, plays a shaping role in the translation. Among the many wonderful books of the Old Testament which Chaderton's company translated was the Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon, the great love lyric of the Bible. Some sixteenth-century reformers had been keen to exclude it, on the grounds of its immodesty and its fleshliness, but others, drawing on a long Jewish tradition, read it as an account of God's love for his people and his church. That is how the luscious verses of the song are annotated in the King James Version: 'A bundle of myrrhe is my welbeloued vnto me,' the girl sings; 'he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.' And her lover replies, 'Behold, thou art faire, my loue: behold, thou art faire, thou hast doues eyes.' Chaderton calmly annotates: 'The Church and Christ congratulate one another.' The lover continues: 'Thy two breasts, are like two Roes, that are twinnes, which feed among the lillies.' (Chaderton: 'Christ setteth forth the graces of the Church) Thy lips, O my spouse! drop as the hony combe: hony and milke are vnder thy tongue, and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon. (Chaderton, inscrutable to the last: 'Christ sheweth his loue to the Church.')*
>
> *That aching gap, between the ecstatic sexuality of the poem and of the rather helpful and interesting notes which the Translators provide, might make us smile now, but it was clearly not a comic effect that the Jacobean Translators were after. The modern reaction to their binding of the religious and the erotic experience is a measure of what Eliot called the*

'dissociation of sensibility' that occurred to English consciousness at some time later in the seventeenth century. We can no longer imagine that erotic passion and religious intelligence can be bound together into one living fabric. All we see in the commentary of Chaderton's company is what looks like their prudishness, their refusal to see the erotic and the passionate for what it is. But in doing that, we patronise them, we assume they were trying to conceal what they were so clearly and so consciously making vital and present. The Sancroft-Bonnest correspondence, Andrewes's private prayers, Donne's sermons and sacred sonnets, the poetry of Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne, all show that a profoundly open 'passionality' is completely and immediately available to these men. Their lives and works are largely motivated by a frame of mind in which emotion, intellect, spirituality

and desire do not exist in insulated compartments but feed and nourish each other in what Eliot might have called, but didn't, an 'association of sensibility', a self-communicativeness which we have lost.

Again and again, as the marginal alternatives make clear, they chose the more passionate, the more immediate, and the more exciting of the alternatives that were open to them. Thou hast ravished my heart', the lover tells his girl, not, as he might have done, Thou hast taken away my heart'. They called the myrrh she poured on him 'sweete smelling' and in the margin suggested it might mean 'running about' or very liquid. In the most direct moment of the whole enchanted seduction, they wrote, 'My beloued put in his hand by the hole of the dere, and my bowels were moved for him'. Although there is a euphemism here - the phrase 'of the dore' is in italics because it is not to be found in the Hebrew - they nevertheless placed in the margin a note which would give the even more explicit 'and my bowels were moued in me for him. Any close reader would realise that the fullest and most explicit statement they were suggesting was 'My beloved put in his hand by the hole, and my bowels were moued in me for him.' This is not the work of people who are avoiding the rich and potent interpenetration of religion and flesh. It is in fact one of the greatest of all English celebrations of that union, culminating in the verse which the Translators entitled 'The vehemencie of love'. The girl of the song, the church, declares, in language as magisterial, passionate and imposing as the translation gets "Set me as seale vpon thine heart, as a seale vpon thine arme for lose it strong as death, jealousie cruel as the graue: the coales thereof are coales of fire, which hath a most vehement flame."

That is language which emerges from a world in which William Sancroft, future Master of Emmanuel, future archbishop can say to his beloved Arthur, 'O lett me bosome thee, lett me preserve thee next to my heart. It is a world in which all divisions of existence - the bodily, the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual - are one, and from which we are now utterly divorced." [84: p131-135]

Sexuality and Culture

Writing in 1995, Michael Vasey commented that, "*The link between sexuality and culture has been a commonplace in an avalanche if scholarly writing on questions of gender or sexuality*." [28: p72] At that time, however, he noted that this had "*hardly impinged on much Christian writing on homosexuality which continue[d] to think of the homosexual person as a distinct psychological type, probably shaped by some sort of defective relationship with one or other parent, whose affective disposition requires either cure or moral concession depending on your viewpoint*." [28: p72]

This understanding of gay identity or lifestyle built/builds "*on concepts of homosexuality framed in the nineteenth century, and is often wedded to a cultural allegiance to the scientific or economic assumptions of modern society*." [28: p72]

Four strands of secular academic writing developed in the last decades of the 20th century [28: p74]:

- study of the origins of the modern gay movement.
- historical studies of homosexualities and their conceptualisation.
- cultural and anthropological studies which demonstrate a great cultural diversity.
- study of homosexuality as an ingredient in or illuminator of Western culture's discussion of desire and social order,

Vasey discusses these different areas of study in detail before stating that, "*serious reflection on any form of homosexuality needs to consider it within its cultural context. Christian assessment of contemporary forms of homosexuality needs to take into account both presuppositions inherited from the past and the anatomy of the modern gay identity*." [28: p79]

"*Homosexuality is a cultural phenomenon. Intimate affection and genital activity between men arise for different reasons in different cultures. What counts as sexual non-conformity depends mainly on what the prevailing pattern of relating between men is in that particular culture. Individuals whose personal make-up fits the social norm in one culture may well be under strong pressure to take up contested practices or a non-conforming social identity in a different cultural framework. Discussions of the causes of homosexuality need to give the same attention to the prevailing patterns of a culture as to the particular disposition of certain individuals. Furthermore, those who share the Christian conviction that human life is profoundly distorted by human alienation from God need to be especially open to the possibility that non-conforming individuals may be different because they are alert to aspects of goodness that the culture as a whole is neglecting*." ... [28: p144]

Different cultures consider specific activities as the norm and different behaviours as aberrant:

The Sambia people of New Guinea were perpetually vulnerable to attack from neighbours and developed the need in their culture for a finely-honed aggressive masculinity. Their culture, as a result, was very firmly divided between the world's of women and men. Young boys spend their first 7 years in the world of women but then had to transition to the social world of men. The transition was prolonged and involved isolation from the women. It was designed to create bonding between the men which would need to continue after they took wives for themselves. The initiation required men to ingest semen from other men.

"*For Sambian men, oral sex, first given and then received, is a normal part of what it is to be male*." [28: p145] Aberrance in their culture is typified by two individuals observed in a study in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

"*Kalutwo who sees himself, and is seen by others, as an inadequate failure, unable to establish a proper masculine identity. He continues to have oral sex with young men beyond the normal period of initiation and is despised for doing so;*" [28: p145][69: Chapter 9] and

"*Imano, who is described as 'gentle' or 'feminine'. [69: Chapter 10] "He is shy and somewhat anxious, easily expresses his emotions, is never aggressive, is eager to please and to receive reassurance. A gentle and considerate person, Imano is more at home with women and children and ill at ease in the more public and aggressive world of men. He looks younger than his years. Imano comes from a strong and respected family. His father, who had an unusually close relationship with Imano's mother, was an important man in the tribe and a tough and fearless warrior. In terms of the prevailing culture, Imano is a reasonably popular figure. In terms of the tribe's gender roles, Imano is identified as sufficiently seriously aberrant as to be given a distinct social identity: aambei-wutny 'gentle'. He is unwilling to take up the warrior role required in society. During the early processes of initiation he was extremely reluctant to be involved in oral sex and later, most unusually, never agreed to be fellated. He married at the earliest opportunity, soon took a second wife, and is known to be unusually interested in sexual relations with them*." [28:p145]

In Sambian culture homosexuality in the form we might define it does not exist. Aberrancy does! "*Sambian behaviour arises within a precise historical niche and reflects the particular tasks which this people face in that context. To require such a culture to change wholesale to what we would regard as something closer to biblical or western patterns would be as inappropriate as saying that the Maasai of Kenya should give up cattle herding and adopt the more settled farming life of the Bantu on the grounds that Bantu culture is closer to that of pre-monarchical Israel.* [70: p16-21 & 56-57] *Particular cultures need to be respected for what they are as the response of whole human communities to the situation in which they find themselves. Any change in the masculine ideal of Sambian culture would have to be viable under the constraints of Sambian life. Similar issues, of course, occur in Western culture when churches require working-class men to adopt the more 'effete' culture of sedentary 'professionals'*." [28: p146]

Other examples of sexuality being a cultural phenomenon and differing approaches to homosexuality within specific cultures can be found in '*Other Voices, Other Worlds*', edited by Terry Brown, [49] and elsewhere. They include:

- the Lakota (Sioux) hca - a male who speaks as women speak, a wi'i'nkte [71: p5-14];
- the Bugis of Sulawesi in Indonesia acknowledge three sexes (female, male, hermaphrodite), four genders (women, men, calabai, and calalai), and a fifth meta-gender group, the bissu. [72]
- In the 16th century, the Imbangala people of Angola had "*men in women's apparel, whom they kept amongst their wives*." [73]
- For centuries, … many African countries did not see gender as a binary in the way that their European colonisers did, nor did they correlate anatomy to gender identity. [73]
- Leiti and Fa'afafine in Tongan and Samoan cultures and Vakasalewalewa and Mahu in Fijian and Tahitian cultures. All "*biological males who express feminine gender identities in a range of ways*." [75: p26] Representatives of both have recognised positions in local church life as baptised Christians. [75: p27-28]

I don't mention these with any intention of arguing that they should be deemed exemplary. These examples merely indicate the way in which cultures approach the question of sexual identity and same-sex sex in different ways. Interestingly, Leah Buckle argues: "*Colonisation and the spread of fundamentalist Christian attitudes from the British meant that much of Africa lost its previous cultural attitude towards sexual orientation and gender identity and were forced to adopt "new" values from British colonisers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Homophobia was legally enforced by colonial administrators and Christian missionaries. In 1910, Christians made up about 9 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa; by 2010, the figure had leapt to 63 per cent. Anti-LGBT laws were not only written into constitutions, but also into the minds of many African people, and after the passing of several generations, this has become dogma."* [73]

The post-colonial picture in Africa suggests that it was British colonisers, rather than those of other Western nations, that enforced homophobic laws. Leah Buckle again: "*There is a direct correlation between countries which belong to the Commonwealth, and therefore have previously been under British rule, and countries that still have homophobic biphobic and/or transphobic legislature in their constitutions. 25 per cent of the world's population (2.4 billion people) currently live in a country belonging to the Commonwealth, however they make up a disproportionately large 50 per cent of countries that still criminalise homosexuality*." [73]

Speaking from Oceania, Winston Halapua comments: "*Some people from the global 'South' refer to their values opposing homosexuality as though their cultural values were in place before contact with the West. A major part of our cultural values we hold sacred about the Bible and its teaching on homosexuality is deeply rooted in the theology brought by pioneering missionaries. Some of the theological assertions of the pioneering missionaries need re-examining and even, perhaps,*

uprooting. When theology perpetuates injustice and subjugating fellow human beings, such theology is party to the doctrine of dehumanisation in the name of God." [75: p34]

Homosexuality was an accepted way of life in India's past. Vinay Chandran of the Bangalore based charitable trust Swabhava is quoted by Manjunath Chinmayee as saying that it is homophobia and not homosexuality that was new to Indian culture. [76] "*There has been present, since ancient times, an acknowledgement of homosexual love and same-sex contact. The Kamasutra is the first literary classic in the world on matters of sex. The sage Vatsyayana authored it in the fourth century CE. The Kamasutra is not an original work- it is a compilation of the rules of love as written in the Kama Shastru, a treatise on life, which dates back to the fourth century BCE or earlier*." [77: p82]

In the Kamasutra, "*Lesbianism is described in detail, as well as the inversion of roles by a dominating female. Male homosexuality forms an integral part of sexual life and various homosexual practices are described in detail. Transvestite prostitutes play a role in public life, and their presence at weddings and religious ceremonies was considered a symbol of good luck*." [78: p10] "*The Kamasutra contains an entire chapter, Auparishtaka, on homosexual love. The Shushruta, a treatise on medicine some two thousand years old, describes treatment of possible injuries incurred during homosexual lovemaking! Eighth-century CE temples dedicated to the Lord Shiva, in Bhuvaneswar, Orissa, and the Khajuraho Temple, a ninth- to eleventh-century to masterpiece in Madhya Pradesh, both contain explicitly carved stone icons of homosexual love. Indian sculptures representing the various sexual positions, group sex and homosexual practice are found in many temples because, according to legend, they protect the temples from lightning*." [77: p82]

In post-colonial India, "*The issue is not homosexuality or heterosexuality, it is a commitment to safe sex, devoid of the use of violence or force, and faithfulness to one's partner that are the norms for all relationships. In a society in which heterosexual relationships have so degenerated, where women, particularly, are vulnerable to many forms of abuse at the hands of their male partners, and where the commodification and commercialisation of sex have become institutionalised, it [seems] immoral to target homosexual love for attack*." [77: p86]

These examples from Africa, Oceania and India suggest that it is possible that, among other things, cultural matters, or at least historic cultural matters that are at play in the positions taken within specific countries. It also seems likely that indigenous attitudes prior to colonization by the West were often more relaxed about these matters.

Living in Love and Faith reminds us that engaging with the cultures around us "*requires our attentiveness to the actual lived texture of the cultures which we live in. We need to look closely at their practices and their patterns of imagination. Big, blunt models of how Church and world relate can hinder this, making it harder to acknowledge what is good or to identify what is bad in the cultures around us. To do this properly we need to take and apply to our own cultural context the counsel of Max Warren in relation to cross-cultural Christian mission:*

> *'Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival'."* [90: p348][94]

As Christians, we have a tendency to make sweeping statements or provide simplistic historical stories about how particular practices originated. "*We need, instead, to consider what our friends and neighbours actually think, say, and do, and to pay attention to the ways in which cultural practices have been repurposed and transformed over time*." [90: p348]

Respectful and careful listening is essential if we are to begin to discern what might be faithful to the gospel in any particular culture. Only when we listen carefully to that particular world and to the Bible can we have a hope of properly beginning to "*see where any particular culture could (perhaps*

in surprising ways) already be working with the grain of God's purposes in creation, and where it has consciously or unconsciously rejected these. The biblical distinction between the desire and way of the Spirit and the desire and way of the flesh (that is, life insofar as it is turned away from God) is a real one (Romans 8). Discerning where exactly that contrast runs in our own lives, the lives of those around us, and the complexities of any human culture is, however, no easy matter. The Spirit/flesh distinction does not cut a neat line between the visible life of the Church and the equally visible life of the surrounding cultures." [90: p348-349]

Not only might the Church have a proper critique of the culture which surrounds it, but also the Church might need to "*learn from its cultural context something about its own Gospel... indeed, the Church may even hear its judgement from this context. It may be shown how restricted its vision of humanity, and of the future and hopes of humanity, has been*." [95]

So, *Living in Love and Faith* reminds us that a "*challenge from outside the Church, or a Christian's involvement in practices or movements beyond the Church, can send Christians to look again at their Scriptures, to look again at Christ, and to see with new eyes a distortion within the life of the church*." [90: p349]

This has manifestly been the case in respect to Church thinking and practice in relation to the environment, or in relation to safeguarding. Changes within the Church have occurred in part in response to patterns of thought and practice in the wider culture. In the light of the challenge posed by these developments, "*many Christians have recognized with new urgency and depth that their own faith calls them to take these matters far, far more seriously than they have done - and that they are called to repent of their failures*." [90: p349]

Culture's challenge to the Church can be accepted or rejected by Christan's or by factions within the Church. These differences can challenge the ability of these different groups to remain in communion with each other. "*They often lead to appeals to reorder our common life together in Christ. Those pressing for this change will understand the call to be generated by a discernment of the Spirit, blowing wherever the Spirit wills, drawing us in surprising ways into the teaching of Jesus. For those Christians who disagree, it can appear that what is being proposed amounts to being blown this way and that by the winds of the prevailing culture*." [90: p350]

Living in Love and Faith puts the problem clearly: "*The most serious difficulties arise when some people hear God calling them to make changes within their church in order to be faithful to the gospel, but those changes cannot be recognized by other Christians as consonant with what God has said in Christ and Scripture. Those other Christians might even view the proposed changes as implying a different gospel. This perspective may arise from Christians living in the same culture and wrestling with the same questions. It is even more likely to be the reaction of those living in very different cultures who may interpret what is happening as amounting to a capitulation of the church to the surrounding world*." [90: p350]

"*Discussions about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage in the Church of England are often marked by people's sweeping caricatures of others' positions. One person accuses another of being 'sectarian', or of having committed 'missional suicide'. They are accused in turn of cultural conformity, or of having traded the gospel for cultural relevance. The real debate here, however, is not between those who are faithful to Christian truth and those who have capitulated to the surrounding culture. Some people involved in the debate think that an insight has arisen in the culture surrounding the church that chimes with, or prompts fresh insight into, a deep truth of the gospel. They believe that, now that they have reread the Scriptures in the light of that insight, they are called by those Scriptures to penitence and change. Others involved in the debate think that the same cultural ideas are ones that, when tested against the Scriptures, turn out to be opposed to the gospel. They believe that the Church is called to resist those ideas in order to remain faithful. Both groups are seeking to be faithful to Christian truth - but they disagree about the proper understanding of that truth*." [90: p350-351]

We need to ask: "*how deep the rethinking of the tradition prompted by a culture's challenges and questions can go, or, in other words, how much of our inheritance is malleable and how much is unchangeable; and how much a church can change and adapt its teaching and practice in and for new and different cultures while remaining faithful - and being viewed from elsewhere as remaining faithful - to the one gospel for all cultures*." [90: p351] We can only tackle these questions by recourse to the Bible, to the Church's tradition, to the study of creation, to human experience, and so on "*The question of how deeply a perspective has been shaped by the surrounding culture, or of how prevalent the relevant perspective is in that wider culture, might be important - but the answers to those questions by themselves will not tell us anything about how that perspective relates to the gospel*." [90: p351]

"*The way in which Christians hear the voice of God is always shaped by the wider culture within which the Church is set, and in more ways than we will ever recognize. Listening to the voice of God involves an ongoing process of discernment, in which we learn to recognize what in the Church and what in the wider world resonates with God's Word spoken in Jesus, and what muffles and distorts it. In the process of that discernment, we need to attend to the way in which Christians in other contexts have learnt to respond to that Word - and to the ways in which they can enable us to hear that Word differently. We also need to learn to recognize some of the places in which we have been mistaking our own voices for the voice of God*." [90: p351-352]

Living in Love and Faith suggests that one way we can do this, "*and discover more of what God's Word means, is by attending to the questions, challenges and possibilities of the cultures that surround us. There is no recipe for how we do this, no shortcut to discovery. There is no alternative but to listen hard to the people all around us, and to read and reread the sources of Christian faith in the light of the questions they ask, the criticisms they make, and the possibilities they present. We may find our eyes opened to new challenges and new possibilities for the Church of England's life - as well as finding our discernments sharpened of what is healthy and what is unhealthy in those cultures themselves*." [90: p352]

Grace - God's Initiative

St. Paul highlights '*grace*' particularly in Titus:

"*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce irreligion and unworldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly while we wait for the blessed hope and manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ*." [Titus 2:11-13]

According to Vasey, "*growth in grace involves not blind obedience but a Spirit-led process of discernment and maturing*." [28: p60] Discernment in sexual ethics (or in any matter) is not about "*the transfer of biblical rules of behaviour to present situations; it must emerge out of a process that St. Paul describes*." [28: p61] A process of Sanctification.

Being faithful to Christ requires not blind obedience but a commitment to growth guided by the Spirit. Vasey highlights Paul's approach to the Old Testament, which Paul sees as subject to at least some temporal or dispensational limitation. "*For all their beauty and wisdom (Deuteronomy 4:6) Old Testament laws were no more than partial expressions of God's will in particular social contexts (cf. Matthew 19:8 on Deuteronomy 24:1-2)*." [28:p62] Vasey goes on to relate how, in Jesus, the purity laws of the Old Testament are fulfilled and superseded. God takes as his friends, people outside of the clean space marked out by the symbolic laws of purity. [28: p62] Grace has a radically different shape from that implied by the Old Testament law codes. "*The New Testament not only undermines cultural absolutes but gives particular honour to the despised outsider*." [28: p63]

As we have already noted, the various observations from different scholars earlier in this article leave us with a significant level of uncertainty over whether we can be sure that Paul was condemning all forms of same-sex sexual activity in his statements. Pike, on balance, favours the conservative position which says that Paul was clearly condemning all forms of same-sex relationships. The truth is that this is a judgement that could so easily be culturally influenced, in just the same way as alternative views could be. Perhaps we will have to accept that no firm answer is possible from our careful consideration of different cultural perspectives. All we can say is that we need to be careful about placing too much reliance on arguments relating to different cultures, because there is real uncertainty about what conclusions can fairly be deduced.

A Christian Sexual Ethic?

How might the observations of the various scholars we encountered earlier in this article and our reflections on Culture and Scripture impact our understanding of a Christian sexual ethic?

This question is important because any focus on same-sex ethics cannot be divorced from the wider question of general Christian sexual ethics.

If we "*understand homosexuality as a matter of sexual identity rather than a free moral choice, that doesn't mean that it doesn't raise moral issues. Of course it does — just as heterosexual orientation does. All our sexuality raises moral issues, not because sex is intrinsically 'bad' but because all sexuality is capable of being a vehicle for the most appalling abuse and degradation as well as for the most sublime altruism and grace*." [4: p39] Vasey also makes the point, when referring to Romans 1:24, that we are in danger of comparing heterosexuality with homosexuality, making heterosexuality 'the healthy norm' when Paul is making the point that "all human desire is profoundly disordered." [28: p24]

In order to develop a positive Christian sexual ethic, in addition to what we have already noted, we will want to pay especial attention "*to the points where Paul [and Jesus are] counter-cultural: that is, where [Paul and Jesus are] wrestling with genuine moral dilemmas ... [which] allows us to glimpse something of the genuinely new and enduring possibilities of living into God's kingdom*." [4: p39] The closest Paul gets to a sustained and coherent treatment of sexual ethics is in 1 Corinthians 5-7. In 1 Corinthians as a whole we can "*hear Paul thinking on his feet, forced by his own congregation — and the new situation in which they find themselves — to face up to a whole series of ethical issues and ask what it means to rethink them from a distinctively Christian perspective — a Kingdom perspective formed by the mind of Christ. Paul's teaching reflects the double strand running through early Christian sexual ethics: what we might call the world-affirming and world-denying strands, this-worldly and otherworldly, 'Now' and 'Not Yet'.*" [4: p39-40]

First, in the **Gospels**, Jesus *"affirms marriage as a God-given, creation institution (Mark 10: 2-12). In a world where it was easy — at least for men — to obtain a divorce on relatively trivial grounds, Jesus invites his followers to high standards of sexual fidelity and commitment (Matthew 5: 27-32). But the disciples' questioning already shows that this was regarded as an impossibly high ideal: and Matthew's version of the saying allows an exception in the case of adultery (Matthew 19: 9-10). In other words, Jesus' high standards are already causing debate and revision within the church*." [4: p40][23]

"*But marriage is not the only option for Jesus' followers. Jesus goes on to say that only 'those to whom it is given' can receive his saying (Matthew 19: 11). Whatever we make of the puzzling saying about 'eunuchs' (Matthew 19: 12), it seems to imply that there are those for whom heterosexual marriage is not an option, whether from birth, from castration, or 'for the sake of the Kingdom'.* [18: p120] *Jesus himself adopts a single lifestyle as a prophetic choice; he also downplays family ties*

(Mark 3: 31-35), and insists that marriage is not part of the 'new creation' in the world to come (Mark 12: 24-25)." [4: p40] [24]

1 Corinthians 5-7 offers an extended reflection on 'bad sex' and 'good sex'. "*Paul is clearly seeking to mediate between two extremes: a 'liberal' view that 'anything goes' (cf. 6.12 'All things are lawful') and a 'conservative'/restrictive view (cf. 7.1 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman'). ... Paul (like Jesus) goes back to Genesis 2.24 to provide a base for a Christian sexual ethic: "Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one flesh with her?" (6.16). For Paul, this 'one flesh' concept applies not only to sex within marriage but to all sexual encounters — a radical (and profoundly counter-cultural) stance which decisively affirms the importance of the body ('the body is for the Lord'). On this view, there is no such thing as 'casual sex.' All sexual acts are equally significant: but their significance can be either destructive or affirmative. ... Paul gives two examples of "bad sex" (porneia), i.e. sexual relations that compromise the holiness of the Christian community (both, we should note, heterosexual). The first is a case of abuse within the household, violating the trust on which the intimacy of family life depends (5.1 'a man is sleeping with his father's wife'). In almost any culture this would be a 'taboo' relationship (cf. 5.2). The other example is a sexual relationship with a prostitute (6.16) — casual sex, sex without commitment, commercial sex, as common and everyday in Paul's world as it is today. These are not homosexual relationships: but (as we have observed), in Paul's world most same-sex relationships would fall under one or other of these broad categories.*" [4: p41]

Paul goes on to talk about the sanctification of a marriage with an outsider (not of the Christian faith). He asserts that the sexual act is "holy" and has the capacity to sanctify (make holy) both non-Christian partners and their children (7.14). This holiness does not come from the marriage being blessed by the church in some way, these are secular marriages. It does not come from procreation. Procreation is not mentioned in these chapters. Nor is it a matter of maintaining the ancient hierarchies of marriage. "*A careful reading of 1 Corinthians 7 makes it clear that Paul's concept of 'one flesh' is inherently reciprocal, both in the studied and careful mutuality of his language, and in the priority he gives to 'pleasing' the other (not the self! 7.4, 33-34).*" [4: p42-43] [25]

Eugene Petersen's '*The Message*' "*brings out this reciprocity very well in 7.3-4: 'The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality – the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to 'stand up for your rights'. Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out*." [4: p43] [26: p165]

"*Nevertheless, Paul's attitude to marriage in 1 Cor 7 is ambivalent to say the least ... Marriage is good – but it's not the only option. ... Paul's preferred sexual option is celibacy*." [4: p43] But, says Loveday Alexander, Paul "*recognises that celibacy is not a practical option for everyone, and states clearly that it is not to be imposed on those who have not the gift for it (7.7) — a point to be remembered by those who would impose life-long celibacy on all same-sex couples. It is better that sexual desire should be 'quenched' (i.e. satisfied) in marriage than left to 'burn' (7.9)*." [4: p44]

For Paul, marriage can be "*seen as a kind of pastoral accommodation to human sexual needs. It may not be the ideal ('I would that all were as I am'): but it is not a sin (7.28, 36: 'Let them marry – it is no sin'.) ... Paul also allows for the possibility of divorce in certain cases (a kind of 'third-best' pastoral accommodation), even though he knows it was forbidden by the Lord (7.10-11). ... The statement that 'the brother or sister is not bound' (7.15) is an implicit ruling that they are legally free to remarry, just as a wife is free to remarry if her husband dies (7.39). ... Paul also valorises singleness in both men and women (again, a deeply counter-cultural stance: 7.32-35). The possibility of a meaningful life as a single woman is almost unheard-of in ancient society*." [4: p44]

Loveday Alexander asks where this leaves the church today. He comments: "*We have to recognise the ambiguity of the biblical material. — and its embeddedness in its own social context. All Scripture is contextual (not just the bits we don't like). That doesn't mean it isn't also God's word — but it does*

mean that we have to use our God-given powers of discernment ('reason') to interpret what it means for our own context. And that means all of us — not just the 'liberal' side of the debate." [4: p44-45]

The Pilling Report

The Pilling Report, [27] which, in 2013, was the latest in a series of reports preceded the publication in which Loveday Alexander was writing noted that "***both sides affirmed their commitment to resisting homophobia and welcoming 'LGBT' people into the church***.'" [4: p45] "*This*," says Loveday Alexander, "*implies that both sides are already working with a construction of sexuality that is radically different from that of the biblical world*." [4: p45]

"*For the minority view (represented by Bishop Keith Sinclair's dissenting report), the conclusion is clear. Paul does not condemn 'homosexuality' as such, but he does prohibit homosexual practice. Therefore those who experience same-sex desire are not morally culpable, but they must abstain from homosexual acts. ... This sounds clear and logical — but is it? It overlooks the fact that the Bible is not a culture-free zone. Ethics and anthropology are inextricably linked. Paul's condemnation of homosexual acts is a logical consequence of his construction of sexuality — and that construction is derived from his own first-century cultural world. Sever the connection, and the moral condemnation is without foundation*." [4: p45]

Loveday Alexander goes on to ask how it can be "*right for the church today to construct a sexual ethic for 'LGBT' people — that is, people whose homosexual orientation we accept as a 'given' of their sexual identity — on an anthropology of desire that does not recognise such orientation? It would be like basing our medical treatment of epilepsy on the Gospel story of the epileptic child in Mark 9.17-27. Mark's description of the child's condition belongs to his own cultural world, in which epilepsy was a form of demon-possession. In retelling the story in our world, we can affirm the timeless truth (Jesus' power to heal a sick child) without perpetuating a first century medical diagnosis*." [4: p45]

Loveday Alexander comments that any sexual ethic for people of homosexual orientation must "*start from the same premise as the church's (universal) rejection of homophobia: that is, from the recognition (shared by both sides in the Pilling debate) that a person's sexual orientation* ***per se*** *is neither immoral nor defective, but a 'given' of their sexual identity. That is where* [the Piling] *report begins, and that must form the basis for our sexual ethic*." [4: p46]

We have, I think reached the pivotal point in Loveday Alexander's discussion. Up to this point it has been possible to listen carefully to his argument without making any decision. At this point, however, a clear decision is needed. Is he right, or is he/it wrong? This is, I believe, where the two sides of the argument actually diverge. For, if this point is accepted, then much of the argument Loveday Alexander puts forward also has to be accepted.

This is, for me, the essential point. Sexual orientation, of itself, cannot be sinful or defective. The important question for all of us, irrespective of our sexual orientation, is how we express our sexuality and whether we chose to do so in a way which dishonours God and others or in a way that honours God and others.

Loveday Alexander accepts however that the Archbishop of Canterbury is right "*that it's unlikely we shall reach agreement on this issue, even within the Church of England — let alone across the Anglican Communion*." [4: p48]

Loveday Alexander was writing in 2014 - that process of listening has been going on in the Church of England over the past 8 years. Over this time there have been significant changes in the UK and in the world. The Religion Media Centre provides a timeline:

2014 Same-sex marriage was legalised in England. It included a provision which made it illegal for the Church of England to opt in to marry same-sex couples, unlike other denominations. It also had protections to stop clergy who declined to marry a gay couple from being sued for discrimination. [64]

2014-16 Around 700 clergy and laity across the Church took part in the "shared conversations" called for by the Pilling Report. Small groups from each diocese spend a weekend at a time at a hotel or conference centre being led through discussions on sexuality by professional facilitators to understand better each side's position. The General Synod held its own version of this in 2016 too. [64]

2015 The Episcopal Church in the US became the first Anglican Church in the world to permit gay marriage formally. They have since been followed by the Canadians and the Scottish. [64]

2016 Another primates' meeting ended with agreement to sanction the Episcopal Church lightly for allowing gay marriages by barring them from internal Anglican Communion decision-making bodies for three years. [64]

2016 The Bishop of Grantham, Nicholas Chamberlain, became the first English bishop to come out openly as gay. He said he was living with his partner in a celibate relationship, in line with the church's teaching. [64]

2017 In response to the shared conversations process, the House of Bishops concluded there would be no change to the church's doctrine on sex or marriage. It called for a new teaching document to be produced by the bishops offering guidance on same-sex relationships, aiming to allow "maximum freedom" without changing doctrine. However, when this proposal was presented to the February General Synod to "take note" of, it was unusually voted down following a successful campaign by pro-LGBTQ+ Christian groups. [64]

2017 In response to this, the archbishops ploughed on with the creation of a teaching document, although it was tweaked to become not a proposed solution to the division on sexuality, but instead a series of resources on theology, sociology, history and science to help the church understand the issues properly. A parallel process would also produce pastoral guidelines to shape how clergy and parishes could care for LGBTQ+ people within the existing doctrine. [64]

2017 Minor skirmishes between the conservative and liberal wings of the church continued at the next July synod meeting. The affirming-LGBTQ+ faction landed a few blows by securing passage of two motions: one condemning "conversion therapy" for gay people, and another calling for a special liturgy to mark gender transition. [64]

2018 A minor row occurred when the House of Bishops responded to that synod motion with guidelines explaining instead how parishes could adapt a liturgy to mark a person's gender transition. Some liberals were upset that the bishops had not created a new service, while conservatives objected to the bishops' claim that this represented no change in teaching on gender, and the evangelical Bishop of Blackburn, Julian Henderson, who led the presentation of the guidelines, later apologised and repudiated them. [64]

2019 It was announced gay bishops would be invited to the next Lambeth Conference, to be held in the summer of 2020, but their spouses and partners would not be, unlike the spouses of straight bishops. This was due to fears their presence would cause a widespread boycott by conservatives. [64]

2020 After a delay caused by the coronavirus pandemic, *Living in Love and Faith* was finally published in November, just before the next meeting of the General Synod. Although it did not present any recommendations on policy, it is expected to inspire the next round of debate on the

CofE's teaching on sexuality. Church of England churches were encouraged to undertake a short course of study based on the Living in Love and Faith materials during 2021 and 2022. [64]

2022 Feedback on *Living in Love and Faith* was completed in time for the Bishops to begin to work on proposals from September 2022, after the delayed Lambeth Conference of 2020 which took place in July 2022. At the 2022 conference Bishops from most of the world listened to each other and debated this issue alongside others.

2023 It is expected that, in February, General Synod will receive a report on the Bishops' deliberations and will vote on the proposals to "agree a clear direction of travel."

Having reviewed the relevant passages of scripture and attempted to understand the cultures into which those passages were written, it is, in my view, possible to be faithful to scripture and affirm faithful, monogamous same-sex relationships. It is also possible, with integrity, to believe that the opposing traditional interpretation is correct.

For me, personally, it is important to return to the early paragraphs of this article where we considered the story in the middle chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. That story encourages us to take what we see in our own culture and what we know based on modern science, biology, psychology, physiology and return to the Bible to look for a new hermeneutic which fits what we know to be true.

Matthew 7 which focusses on good and bad fruit may be the starting point. Paul's assertion in Galatians 3:28 that, "*there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*," must provide a dynamic of inclusion for all excluded groups.

My feeling is also, however, that nothing pertaining to our faith should be allowed to take us outside of the scope of Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17. Historically, the church has allowed many things to take priority over that prayer. When doing so, it places itself outside of Jesus' desire for it. Our priority must be to acknowledge our differences and then seek the unity to which Christ calls us.

This requires a dedicated listening heart which accepts that there is no simple way forward. Our listening needs to be "*rooted in deep and prayerful faith in Jesus Christ, manifested in Scripture, human reason, the tradition of the church and human experience, including the great complexity of human history and cultures, [accepting that] inevitably there will be disagreements*." [49: p2] These need to be encountered, listened to and heard, and addressed.

This kind of attentive listening is an act of holy love through which the Holy Spirit can speak. It requires of us a willingness to examine ourselves to understand how and why we react to what we hear. *Pastoral Principles of Living Well Together* gives some guidance "*which will help us to discern together what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Rev. 2.11,17,29; 3.6,13,22)*." [90: p4] Examining ourselves will help us to: address areas of our own ignorance; acknowledge prejudice (by welcoming people as they are, loving them unconditionally, seeking to see Christ in them and nurturing respect between people who disagree); admit hypocrisy (by not condemning certain behaviours and attitudes while turning a blind eye to others, remembering that we are all fallible, broken and equally in need of God's grace are all are weak); cast out fear (by consciously demonstrating and living out what it means for perfect love to cast out fear even in situations of disagreement and by modelling openness and vulnerability as each of us wrestles prayerfully with the costliness of Christian discipleship); speak into silence (by remembering that we are the Body of Christ, called to relate deeply and openly with one another, sharing what is on our hearts as well as in our minds, and by practising deep listening, without a hidden agenda, that encourages conversations about questions of human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage); pay attention to power (by being alert to attempts to control others, remembering that God's Spirit alone can bring transformation into our lives and the lives of

others, and through following Christ's example of service and compassion as we accompany one another in following the way of the cross). [90: p4-5][cf. 88]

Conclusion

In conclusion: while believing that it is time for the Church to accept and make proper provision for people who are gay and in faithful, monogamous, sexual relationships, I want to quote, first, Duncan Dormor and Jeremy Morris and then Jenny Te Paa who wrote in 2000s but whose comments are still applicable in 2022,:

"*There is no consensus within the Church of England currently on the scriptural, moral and theological basis on which a change could be made, and arguing ... for a position that seeks consensus is fraught with difficulty. But the effort, we believe, must be made. The current climate of hostility and recrimination hardly helps that process. In the current situation, even those who ... seek some sort of 'holding' position, reaffirming the traditional position while being open to further exploration, are likely to be regarded by some as unforgivably liberal and compromised. A spirit of genuine openness has much to commend it, no matter how hard it may be in practice to sustain*." [48: p6]

"*The gospel imperative is always for us to be in right relationship with one another, not as and when we choose, or even if we choose. Therefore, I support the urgings of those church leaders who are desperately seeking for ways of modelling willingness and ability to place relationality in Christ as the priority and only starting point of conversation and engagement. This means a willingness to be at all times and in all ways working sacramentally and, therefore, unconditionally toward reconciliation between and among all of God's people*." [74: p22]

References and Notes

1. Quoted by Prof. Helen King; *Over to the bishops? Finding ways to respect differences*; https://www.inclusive-church.org/2022/10/19/over-to-the-bishops-finding-ways-to-respect-differences, accessed on 30th October 2022.
2. https://www.belovedarise.org/reasons-to-believe/a-brief-biblical-case-for-lgbtq-inclusion, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
3. https://www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-homosexuality, accessed on 31st October 2022.
4. Revd. Canon Prof. Loveday Alexander; *Homosexuality and the Bible: Reflections of a Biblical Scholar*; in *Grace and Disagreement: Shared Conversations on Scripture, Mission and Human Sexuality*; The Archbishops' Council, 2014, p24-51
5. For a fuller exegesis, see Loveday Alexander; *This is That: The Authority of Scripture in the Acts of the Apostles*; in Aaron Son (ed.), H*istory and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for His 80th Birthday* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), pp.55-72; Luke Timothy Johnson; *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
6. https://reformationproject.org/case/good-vs-bad-fruit, accessed on 28th October 2022.
7. https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/science-magazines/historic-dispute-earth-center-universe, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
8. https://www.christies.com/features/the-first-proof-that-man-is-not-at-the-centre-of-the-universe-9960-1.aspx, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
9. https://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=ilasbw, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
10. https://europeanacademyofreligionandsociety.com/news/the-dutch-reformed-church-and-its-contribution-to-apartheid, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
11. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/men-and-women-in-the-church, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
12. John Weaver; Reflecting on Donald Trump and Climate Change; https://jri.org.uk/reflecting-on-donald-trump-and-climate-change-by-rev-dr-john-weaver, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
13. A poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, reported in the Huffington Post, 22nd September 2011.
14. Sarah Pulliam Bailey; Why so many white evangelicals in Trump's base are deeply skeptical of climate change; The Washington Post, 2nd June 2017; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/06/02/why-so-many-white-evangelicals-in-trumps-base-are-deeply-skeptical-of-climate-change, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
15. https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/research-majority-of-pastors-doubt-global-warming-but-recycle-at-church, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
16. Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church; Church House Publishing, London, 2012, p79.
17. It is worth noting that, "Other stories in the Hebrew Bible offer more positive images of the close ties of affection and loyalty that can arise between men (David and Jonathan) and between women (Ruth and Naomi), recognising perhaps that such 'homosocial' relationships offered a kind of companionship that was often lacking in marriage in traditional societies. Nevertheless, both stories of friendship presuppose a background of (heterosexual) marriage as the default sexual relationship. [4: p32] [18]
18. Marti Nissinen; Homoeroticism in the biblical world: A historical perspective; Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1998.
19. Besides Nissinen, *Homoeroticism* ..., p103-113, see also the excellent discussion of this passage by Margaret Davies; *New Testament Ethics and Ours: Homosexuality and Sexuality in Romans 1:26-27*; Biblical Interpretation 3, 3 (1995), p315-31.

20. The American Psychological Association Monitor on Psychology; 10th March 2009, Volume 40 No. 3.
21. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-manchester-45615029; and https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/teenager-found-hanged-after-fears-8299328; both accessed on 2nd November 2022.
22. https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/8-june/news/uk/it-took-this-death-to-end-silence-on-inclusion-says-priest-of-teenager-who-took-her-own-life, accessed on 2nd November 2022.
23. For a full discussion, cf. William Loader; Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005.
24. Carolyn Osiek & David L. Balch; Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches Westminster John Knox, Lousiville, 1997, p123-43.
25. Unlike most ancient philosophers, Paul goes out of his way in this chapter to address both husbands and wives. ... Ancient philosophical texts on marriage are addressed solely to the male partner: women have little choice, and are not treated as moral subjects. [4: p43]
26. Rowan Williams highlights this 'remarkable passage' where Paul speaks of 'mutual rights and mutual belonging: neither partner owns or governs their own body, but makes it over to the other, a very startling idea indeed in Paul's culture'. Rowan Williams; Is there a Christian Sexual Ethic?'; in Open to Judgement; DLT 1988 p161-167.
27. **The Pilling Report** was published on 28/11/2013. Its full title is *The Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*. The report considers the rapidly changing context within which the group undertook its work. It examines the available data about the views of the public in our country over time. The report considers homophobia, evidence from science, from scripture and from theologians. During their work, members of the group not only gathered evidence from many experts, groups and individuals but also met a number of gay and lesbian people, often in their homes, to listen to their experiences and insights. The report offers 18 recommendations. The press release which marked its publication stated that the first recommendation is intended to set the context for the report as a whole. It warmly welcomes and affirms the presence and ministry within the church of gay and lesbian people both lay and ordained. ... Three recommendations look at the report's proposal for 'facilitated conversations', across the Church of England and in dialogue with the Anglican Communion and other churches, so that Christians who disagree deeply about the meaning of scripture on questions of sexuality, and on the demands of living in holiness for gay and lesbian people, should understand each other's concerns more clearly and seek to hear each other as authentic Christian disciples. ... Further recommendations call on the church to combat homophobia whenever and wherever it is found, and to repent of the lack of welcome and acceptance extended to homosexual people in the past. ... The recommendations do not propose any change in the church's teaching on sexual conduct. They do propose that clergy, with the agreement of their Church Council, should be able to offer appropriate services to mark a faithful same sex relationship. The group does not propose an authorised liturgy for this purpose but understands the proposed provision to be a pastoral accommodation which does not entail any change to what the church teaches. No member of the clergy, or parish, would be required to offer such services and it could not extend to solemnising same sex marriages without major changes to the law. ... The report notes that the church's teaching on sexuality is in tension with contemporary social attitudes, not only for gay and lesbian Christians, but for straight Christians too. In relation to candidates for ministry, it recommends that whether someone is married, single or in a civil partnership should have no bearing on the assurances sought from them that they intend to order their lives consistently with the teaching of the Church on sexual conduct. ... The report includes a 'dissenting statement' from the Bishop of Birkenhead who found himself unable to support all the recommendations made by the group as a whole. The main part of the report is supported and signed by all the other members of the group, including the advisers. ... The House of Bishops discussed the report for the first time in December 2013, and it was further debated by the College of Bishops in January 2014.
28. Martin Vasey; *Strangers and Friends: a new exploration of homosexuality and the Bible*; Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1995.

29. John Pike, quoted by Ian Paul on his blog. Ian Paul links to John Pike's full article here: https://www.psephizo.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/What-types-of-same-gender-relationships-were-the-ancients-and-biblical-writers-aware-of-short.docx, accessed on 24th November 2022.
30. Phyllis Bird; *The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation concerning Homosexuality*; in *Homosexuality, science, and the "plain sense" of scripture*; ed. David L. Balch, Eerdmans, 2000.
31. Robert A.J. Gagnon; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice – Texts and Hermeneutics*; Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2001.
32. David F. Greenberg; *The Construction of Homosexuality*; The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
33. John Pike says that "*some Mesopotamian texts refer to cultic activities amongst groups such as the assinnu, (c. 4500 BC to c. 609 BC) who worshipped the goddess Astarte/Inanna/Ishtar, but the precise activities of the cultic personalities and their very existence are disputed*." [29]
34. Mark D. Smith; *Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1.26, 27*; Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 1996, 64: p223-54.
35. William R. G. Loader; *The NT on Sexuality (Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman Era)*; Eerdmans, 2012.
36. Bruce S. Thornton; *"Eros", The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado & Cumnor Hill, Oxford, 1997.
37. Kenneth J. Dover; Greek Homosexuality; Harvard, Cambridge, MA, 1989.
38. NT Wright, in interview with John L. Allen, Jr, 2004.
39. See, for example, Ken Wilson; *A Letter to My Congregation*, David Crumm Media, LLC, 2014, citing Greco-Roman scholar Sarah Ruden; *Paul among the People*, Chapter 3.
40. Eva Cantarella, trans. O' Cuilleanain; *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, Yale University Press (Nota Bene), New Haven CT and London, 2002.
41. Jeffrey Weeks; *Sexuality*; Routledge, London, 1989.
42. Kaye Wellings, Julia Field, Anne Johnson, Jane Wadsworth; *Sexual Behaviour in Britain*; Penguin, London, 1994.
43. John Boswell; *Christianity, Homosexuality and Social Tolerance*; Chicago University Press, 1980. cf. also the Gaelic euphemism 'the friendly hand' for masturbation which points to the presence in some circles of an alternative to the official view. [44: p20] Also, in the post-Reformation period different views of masturbation existed side by side. [45: p48-51][46: p87]
44. Jim Cotter; Pleasure, Pain and Passion; Cairns, 1988.
45. Jeffrey Weeks; *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*; Longman, 1981.
46. Bruce R. Smith; *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*; University of Chicago Press, 1994.
47. Marcus Green; *Th*e Possibility of Difference: A biblical affirmation of inclusivity; Kevin Mathew, Stowmarket, Suffolk, 2018.
48. Duncan Dormor and Jeremy Morris; *Introduction*; in Duncan Dormor and Jeremy Morris (eds); *An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church*; SPCK, London, 2007.
49. Terry Brown; *Introduction*; in Terry Brown ed; *Other Voices, Other Worlds*; Church Publishing, New York, 2006.
50. Richard Hooker; *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book V, 8:2.
51. Ian Paul; *The Biblical Case for the 'Traditional' Position*; in *Grace a*nd Disagreement Part 2, A Reader: Writings to Resource Conversations; The Archbishops' Council, 2015.
52. Marcus Green; *Salvation's Song*; Survivor Books, 2004.
53. Tim Tennent; http://seedbed.com/feed/slaves-women-and-homosexuals, accessed on 28th November 2022.
54. Richard Burridge; Being Biblical? *Slavery, Sexuality and the Inclusive Community*; *22nd Eric* Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture, Keble College, Oxford, 2007.
55. Matthew Vines; God and the Gay Christian; Crown Publishers, Random House.

56. Marcus Green says that Sam Allberry; *What does the Bible say about homosexuality?'*; https://www.livingout.org/resources/articles/18/what-does-the-bible-say-about-homosexuality, is a good example of a traditionalist line here, and indeed on several texts.
57. *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*
58. St. Augustine; *Confessions*; translated by Henry Chadwick, OUP, Oxford, 1992, see, for example, Book VI xii(21).
59. *Friendship*; D.J. Atkinson, D.H. Field; *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*; IVP, 1995, p398-399.
60. Plato; *The Symposium*; *translated and int*roduced by Walter Hamilton, Penguin Classics, 1951, p12, 21-27. ... Vasey comments: "*In the classical culture of the Mediterranean, love between men was an important part of philosophical and poetic discourse. The Symposium, Plato's great treatment of the character and metaphysical nature of love which has strongly influenced Christian thought and devotion, is cast in the form of a dialogue on love set at a dinner party that Socrates shares with male friends. Love, the dialogue implies, is 'the consciousness of need for the beautiful and the good'. 'The love concerned', comments an authoritative introduction, 'is homosexual love; it is assumed without argument that this alone is capable of satisfying a man's highest and noblest aspirations.' ... This example from Plato makes clear that the pre-Christian classical tradition of passionate male friendship made no great distinction between friendship that involved sexual intimacy and love that focused on the physical and moral beauty of the beloved*." [47: p81]
61. John Boswell; *Same-sex Unions in Pre-modern Europe*, Villard Books, New York, 1994, p74ff.
62. https://www.artofmanliness.com/people/relationships/the-history-and-nature-of-man-friendships, accessed on 1st December 2022.
63. https://science.jrank.org/pages/9404/Friendship-Male-Male-Friendship.html, accessed on 1st December 2022.
64. https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/factsheet-sexuality-timeline-in-the-church-of-england, accessed on 4th December 2022.
65. G. Kittel .ed; trans. G.W. Bomily; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Vol III, p1101-1104.
66. Compare, for instance, Leviticus 20:10 with John 8:5.
67. See Galatians 2:14-17; 3:1-3; 5:2-6.
68. *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*; Herald Press, 1983.
69. Gilbert Herdt and Robert J. Stroller; *Intimate Communications: Erotics and the Study of Culture*; Columbia University Press, 1990.
70. cf. Vincent Donovan; *Christianity Rediscovered*; SCM, London, 1978.
71. Martin Brokenleg; *Lakota Hca*; in Terry Brown ed; *Other Voices, Other Worlds*; Church Publishing, New York, 2006, p5ff.
72. Sharyn Graham; *Sulawesi's fifth gender*; https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Societal_attitudes_toward_homosexuality and https://web.archive.org/web/20060618180935/http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit66/bissu2.htm, accessed on 10th December 2022.
73. Leah Buckle; *African sexuality and the legacy of imported homophobia*; https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/african-sexuality-and-legacy-imported-homophobia, accessed on 10th December 2022.
74. Jenny Plane Te Paa; *Theology and the Politics of Exclusion: An Indigenous Woman's Perspective*; in Terry Brown .ed; *Other Voices, Other Worlds*; Church Publishing, New York, 2006, p15ff.
75. Winston Halapua; *Moana Waves: Oceania and Homosexuality*; in Terry Brown .ed; *Other Voices, Other Worlds*; Church Publishing, New York, 2006, p26ff.
76. Manjunath Chinmayee; *Homosexuality in India, where tradition still rules*; https://greatreporter.com/2003/06/08/homosexuality-india-where-tradition-still-rules, accessed on 12th December 2022.
77. Aruna Gnanadason; *The Struggle to be Human: A Reflection on Homosexuality in India*; in Terry Brown .ed; *Other Voices, Other Worlds*; Church Publishing, New York, 2006, p77ff.

78. Alain Danielou (trans.); *The Complete Kamasutra: The First Modern Translation of the Classic Indian Text*; Park Street Press, Rochester,Vermont, 1994.
79. Duleep de Cickera; *A Spirituality in Christ that Humbles and Transforms*; in Terry Brown .ed; *Other Voices, Other Worlds*; Church Publishing, New York, 2006, p91ff.
80. **The Windsor Report**: "*In 2003, the Lambeth Commission on Communion was appointed by the Anglican Communion to study problems stemming from the consecration of Gene Robinson, the first noncelibate self-identifying gay priest to be ordained as an Anglican bishop, in the Episcopal Church in the United States and the blessing of same-sex unions in the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster. The Commission, chaired by Archbishop Robin Eames, published its findings as the Windsor Report on 18 October 2004. The report recommended a covenant for the Anglican Communion, an idea that did not come to fruition. ... In February 2005, the issue of homosexuality was heavily discussed at a regular meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion at Dromantine in Northern Ireland. Of the 38 Primates, 35 attended. The Primates issued a communiqué that reiterated most of the Windsor Report's statements, with the addition that The Episcopal Church USA and Anglican Church of Canada were asked to voluntarily withdraw from the Anglican Consultative Council, the main formal international entity within the Anglican Communion until the next Lambeth Conference in 2008. ... The Windsor Report was criticised by liberals ... for seeming to take for granted that the actions of New Hampshire and New Westminster—and homosexuality in general—were wrong. For example, while it calls for both conservatives and liberals to apologise for disunity, it acknowledges that the conservatives may have acted out of a sense of duty. However, it concedes no such acknowledgement to New Westminster and New Hampshire. ... On 12th February 2008 the Archbishop of Canterbury announced the formation of the Windsor Continuation Group (WCG). The WCG was formed to address the remaining questions around the Windsor Report and the various formal responses to the Windsor Report from the provinces and instruments of the Anglican Communion. The WCG was chaired by Bishop Clive Handford*;" these notes are taken from Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windsor_Report, accessed on 11th December 2022.
81. The ECUSA and ACC decisions noted above resulted in great alarm and anger in various parts of the Anglican Communion. Archbishop Robin Eames was asked to head a Commission which resulted in the Windsor Report of 2004. [80]
82. Renta Nishihara; *Sexuality and the Church's Understanding of Authority: A Response from Japan*; in Terry Brown .ed; *Other Voices, Other Worlds*; Church Publishing, New York, 2006, p99ff
83. Maggi Dawn; *Whose Text is it Anyway? Limit and Freedom in Interpretation*; in Duncan Dormor & Jeremy Morris .eds; *An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church*; SPCK, London, 2007, p10-21
84. Adam Nicolson; *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible*; HarperCollins, London, 2003.
85. Arnold Browne; *The call of Christ: reading the New Testament*; in Duncan Dormor & Jeremy Morris .eds; *An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church*; SPCK, London, 2007, p33-45.
86. Browne [85] comments: "*Interpreting scripture in the light of Christ, Paul argues that it is appropriate for him to remain single and to support himself by manual labour. However, he accepts that the other apostles are being loyal to scripture and to the teaching of Jesus in being accompanied by believing wives and supported by the Christian community. Thus Paul believes that he is imitating the pattern of Jesus' life in renouncing his right to support just as much as the other apostles are following Jesus' teaching in their dependence on the community. Reading scripture in the light of Christ leads then not only to a diversity of interpretation but also to an acceptance of such diversity.*" [85: p35] He continues: "*Since our common concern is to read the Bible in order to respond to Jesus, it is not surprising that in our current debates we are tempted to fill in the gaps where Jesus seems to be silent. Some may argue from the rigorous demands of Jesus' call, 'how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10.24), that he was stricter than his contemporaries in his attitudes to sexual sin. Others may argue from his association with those despised by other religious teachers, 'this*

fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them' (Luke 15.2), that he was more tolerant. But it is crucial that we do not reduce the question of what it means to be faithful to the call of Jesus to a decision between strictness and leniency in the application of the law. … Already within the New Testament itself we find that there are different ways of understanding Jesus' attitude to the Jewish law. We can see this, for example, from the contrasting ways in which Matthew and Mark understand Jesus' saying that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles' (Matthew 15:11; see also Mark 7.15). In Matthew; Jesus' explanation of his saying to his disciples is a challenge to the Pharisees' custom of always washing their hands before eating: 'to eat with unwashed hands does not defile' (Matthew 15:20). There is no suggestion here that Jesus questioned the validity of the dietary laws contained in the Jewish scriptures themselves. However, in Mark, when Jesus explains the same saying to his disciples, 'Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile?", the evangelist then adds the further explanation, 'Thus he declared all foods clean' (Mark 7.19-20). In this way Mark interprets the saying of Jesus to mean that Jesus himself set aside the scriptural dietary laws. Matthew, writing for Jewish followers of Jess understands him to be the Messiah who interprets and intensifies the demands of the law: 'not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5.18). Mark, writing for Gentile followers of Jesus, shares Paul's view that in the messianic age the law itself is set aside, 'Thus he declared all foods clean' (Mark 7.20). … This diversity of Jewish and Gentile Christian readings of scripture in the light of Christ confirms that we need to move beyond the too simplistic question of whether Jesus was strict or lenient in his interpretation of the law. Instead we must ask why Jesus could be interpreted both as intensifying the demands of the law and as setting them aside. This leads us to notice that Jesus' fundamental attitude to the Mosaic regulations is to see them as inadequate. Jesus' teaching on divorce makes this point. [cf. Mark 10:2-9 and Matthew 19:3-8] [85: p35-36]

Brown continues: "*Rather than fill in the gaps with our assumptions about Jesus' strictness or leniency as a legal interpreter, we should notice instead that his ministry has a different focus. Jesus' priority is to call individuals into a community that shares his life and his destiny, proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God in words and actions (see especially Matthew 10.5-15; Mark 6.6b-13; Luke 9.1-6). ... This priority of the call to hear and live the good news of the coming kingdom of God is expressed in a number of encounters where entering into a relationship with Jesus takes precedence over any application of the law of Moses. For example, the woman suffering from haemorrhages is not condemned for making Jesus unclean by her touch (see Leviticus 15.19-30), but is told by him, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease (Mark 5.34, see also Matthew 9.22; Luke 8.40). In Luke 7.36-50 Jesus welcomes the kissing and anointing of his feet by a 'woman in the city, who was a sinner'. A strict interpretation of Leviticus 5.1-5 indicates a risk of defilement upon even being touched by a sinner. This is why Jesus' host says to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him that she is a sinner. But Jesus says to him, 'her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love'. In Mark 1.40-44 (see also Matthew 8.1-4; Luke 5.12-16) the same sense of priority is seen in Jesus' touching a leper while he is still unclean (see Leviticus 13-14). Jesus himself says to the leper, 'Be made clean', even though, according to the law, it is the prerogative of the priest to pronounce a leper clean. Jesus then sends the cleansed leper to the priest to make his legal offering as a testimony to them'. In this way the man he has healed becomes a witness to the precedence of Jesus' saving word over any application of the law. … These encounters express clearly Jesus' sense of the inadequacy of the regulations of the law. His transgression of its boundaries between the clean and the unclean clearly horrified some of his contemporaries. However, even the law of Moses must give way to the prior claims of Jesus' call to respond to his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. Our fundamental question should not be about his severity or tolerance as a legal interpreter. Our concern should be our faithfulness to his call to share his life and destiny*." [85: p38-39]

87. Archbishop.of Canterbury, Justin Welby and Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell; *Forward*; in House of Bishops of the Church of England; ***Living in Love and Faith***; Church House Publishing, 2020, pVII-X.
88. Church of England; ***Pastoral Principles of Living Well Together***; Church House Publishing, London, 2019 and available at https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership- and-governance/general-synod/bishops/pastoral-advisory-group/pastoral-principle, accessed on 20th December 2022.
89. Jessica Martin; *Godly conversation: marriage, the companionate life and the Church of England*; in Duncan Dormor & Jeremy Morris .eds; *An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church*; SPCK, London, 2007, p62-73.
90. House of Bishops of the Church of England; ***Living in Love and Faith***; Church House Publishing, 2020.
91. See, for instance, Nuffield Council on Bioethics; *(Un)natural: Ideas about Naturalness in Public and Political Debates about Science, Technology and Medicine*; Nuffield Council on Bioethics, London, 2015; available at, https://www.nuffieldbioethics.org/publications/naturalness, accessed on 23rd December 2022.
92. The Virginia Report (1997); *The Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission*; The Anglican Consultative Council, London, 1997; available at, https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/150889/report-1.pdf, accessed on 24th December 2022.
93. John Webster; *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003); Douglas Burton-Christie; *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*; Oxford University Press, New York, 1993); Chris E. W. Green; *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture*; CPT, Cleveland, Ohio, 2015; Mark McIntosh; *Mystical Theology*; Blackwell, Oxford, 1998; Lewis Ayres, *'Augustine on the Rule of Faith: Rhetoric, Christology, and the Foundation of Christian Thinking'*; Augustinian Studies 36:1, 2005, p33-49.
94. Max Warren; *General Introduction to the Christian Presence Series*; in Kenneth Cragg; *Sandals at the Mosque: Christian Presence Amid Islam*; SCM, London, 1959, p9-10.
95. The Lambeth Conference 1988; *Dogmatic and Pastoral Concerns*; in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference 1988: The Reports, Resolutions & Pastoral Letters from the Bishops*; Church House Publishing, London, 1988; Section 37, p90.
96. Jonathan Tallon; *Affirmative: Why You Can Say Yes to the Bible and Yes to People Who Are LGBTQI+*; Richardson Jones Press, 2022.
97. James Henley Thornhill; *The Rights and Duties of Masters: A Sermon Preached at the Dedication of a Church Erected in Charleston, S. C., for the Benefit and Instruction of the Coloured Population. Charleston, S.C.*; Walker and James Press, 1850.
98. Charles Hodge; *Slavery. By William E. Channing*; in The Princeton Review 8, No. 2, 1836, p268-306
99. Frederick Douglass; *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Miller, Orton and Mulligan, New York and Auburn, 1855.
100. Jonathan Tallon; *Affirmative: Why You Can Say Yes to the Bible and Yes to People Who Are LGBTQI+*; Richardson Jones Press, 2022, p111-115: "*While the positive case for anti-slavery is that no one would choose slavery for themselves, and therefore it was wrong, Douglass also argued that slavery was wrong for other reasons:*

    I have shown that slavery is wicked—wicked, in that it violates the great law of liberty, written on every human heart—wicked, in that it violates the first command of the decalogue—wicked, in that it fosters the most disgusting licentiousness—wicked, in that it mars and defaces the image of God by cruel and barbarous inflictions—wicked, in that it contravenes the laws of eternal justice, and tramples in the dust all the humane and heavenly precepts of the New Testament. — DOUGLASS (1855, 437)

    How did the debate end? After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and subsequent victory for the abolitionists, the debate seems to have faded away. Slavery was no longer an

urgent issue to pursue by either side. The problems with just using a 'plain-sense' approach to scripture, without considering the trajectory or spirit of scripture, were forgotten.

How is that relevant to current debates over sexuality and gender? I think there are a few lessons we need to keep in mind. Before I outline these, some of you will be saying, 'but the issues are different'. And you would be right.

We cannot do a direct, one-for-one comparison between slavery and issues around sexuality and gender. But there are some points of overlap, and we can learn from these as we approach our current debate.

First, relying on just a 'plain-sense' approach to some specific verses is not how we should interpret the Bible. Adherence to this approach led many biblical scholars astray in the nineteenth century, leading to their failure to condemn slavery. The issues of slavery and sexuality and gender challenge how we should read and interpret scripture.

Secondly, our experiences have a part to play, and can give us insight into scripture. It was their personal experience of enslavement that led both Equiano and Douglass to read the Bible as being on the side of the enslaved; to realise and affirm the importance of liberty and equality. Experience can enable us to detect or appreciate parts of the Bible that others have missed or underplayed.

Third, and as a corrective to 'plain-sense', it is vital that we try to appreciate and understand the culture in which a Biblical text arose. What was the particular problem or issue that it was addressing? Some parts of the Bible are addressing specific, temporary issues, and to take them as timeless truths is to do a disservice to the Bible.

Appreciating that Biblical texts need to be understood within their historical contexts has always been a part of the evangelical tradition. However, it got lost during the debates over slavery. The principle applied was that if slavery was allowed or sanctioned at one point in history then it should always be accepted, in other words, as a timeless truth. Abolitionists, in contrast, saw the New Testament approach as containing the seeds leading to abolition, with room for owners as a temporary, time and culture-bound allowance.

This leads to the fourth point, which is that we must take not only specific verses seriously, but also the trajectory, or spirit, of scripture. Failure to consider this aspect seriously enough is what led to a legalistic approach that allowed slavery.

What does it look like to try and apply these lessons to the current debates? Here is a brief, but not comprehensive, response.

First, the existence of a handful of verses that seem to prohibit homosexuality directly is not enough to decide the debate. White evangelicals also pointed to specific verses to prop up slavery as an institution.

Secondly, people who are LGBTQI+ need to be part of the discussion, and listened to carefully. It was those most directly affected by mis-readings in the slavery debate who provided different interpretations of scripture, which showed it could not be considered to be in favour of slavery. Similarly, in the current debates, the actual experience and reading of the Bible by people directly affected is essential. There is a famous slogan (with its roots in democratic reforms): nothing about us without us.

I am guilty here myself. This is a book written by a straight, cis-gendered white male, with multiple layers of structural advantage. However, I have consulted with people who are LGBTQI+, and tried to ensure that I am representing arguments that they too wish to make.

But too often, decisions are made in church meetings or synods by people without any experience, and without any challenge to one particular interpretation of the Bible. The slavery debates show the dangers inherent in that approach. Any discussions or debates about how to interpret the Bible on these issues must include those who are LGBTQI+.

Thirdly, we need to consider seriously the context of the verses that are often brought up. I hope that this book will help with this in a small way by bringing some of the scholarship to a wider audience. We are treading on treacherous ground if we simply assume that any and all statements in the Bible are timeless truths, rather than God at work in a particular time and place. Again, I do not want to be misunderstood. I do believe there are some timeless truths (for example: God is love; love your neighbour). But too often the cultural background of a verse is ignored and the reason for its place in the Bible dismissed. We do no favours to the Bible or ourselves when we treat it this way.

The fourth and final point is around the trajectory and spirit of scripture. Those who are non-affirming may also claim that they take this seriously. They present a narrative of a God who made male and female in creation, then uses a marriage metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church. It is a serious response.

However, you can also see an affirming trajectory in scripture. God creates a world with amazing diversity, and proclaims it good. God creates a companion for the first human, because it is not good for humans to be alone. And our understanding of the scope of God's grace widens through Christ to include people who are considered unclean, and who do unclean acts and eat unclean foods. All of the amazing diversity of both humankind and creation is brought together in Christ, in whom there is no male and female.

Once you are aware of the trajectory, you start noticing it in scripture beyond the account in Acts 10–15 (another reason to include those with experience). For example, consider the account of the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30). Jesus bluntly challenges this Gentile woman seeking help for her daughter, but her rejoinder shows why Jesus aids her:

Jesus said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." — MARK 7:27–28

Cannot those who are LGBTQI+ eat the crumbs from under the table?

There are now two thousand years of Christian history. In that time, the Church has done much that is good, and some that is shameful. At various moments, Christians have been faced with choosing between an option seemingly prohibited by some scriptural verses, or considering the spirit of scripture and seeing God at work. On the issue of circumcision for Gentile males, an expansive reading of scripture won the day. On the issue of lending money at interest, an expansive reading of scripture won the day. On the issue of slavery, an expansive reading of scripture won the day.

This does not automatically mean that affirming the inclusion of people who are LGBTQI+ is right. But it should, at the very least, make us humble and hesitant before declaring that it must be wrong. Consider whether, on the issue of affirmation, an expansive reading of scripture should win the day."

101. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usury, accessed on 10th February 2023.
102. Kevin P. Considine; (2016). *Is it sinful to charge interest on a loan?*; U.S. Catholic, 2016; https://uscatholic.org/articles/20163/is-it-sinful-to-charge-interest-on-a-loan, accessed om 10th February 2023.

103. Theology of Work Project; *Ezekiel 18:8a - The Righteous Man Does Not Take Advance or Accrued Interest*; www.theologyofwork.org; https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/ezekiel/ezekiel-18/principle-3he-does-not-take-advance-or-accrued-interest-ezek-188a, accessed on 20th February 2023.
104. Klaus Issler; *What does the Old Testament say about Loans and Interest? Part 3*; The Good Book Blog - Biola University Blogs, 2018; https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2018/what-does-the-old-testament-say-about-loans-and-interest-part-3, accessed on 20th February 2023.
105.