

## **Key points in your understanding of Scripture and how this influences where you stand in relation to matters of human sexuality**

I want to explore four levels where Scripture speaks to me in thinking how we understand ourselves and discern what it means to love God and neighbour in relation to sexuality.

**First**, in asking “how shall we live?” a key text for me is Ephesians 4.1 – “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received”. We’re to work out how to live not by reference to our own desires or how those around us live but by reference to God and his call on our lives. The central pattern of that call is given by Christ’s death and resurrection as symbolised in our baptism. Romans 12 then shows how we discern God’s good and perfect will. It requires three disciplines undoing our universal human failings as described in Romans 1: not conforming to the pattern of this world, offering our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God and being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

**Second**, Scripture tells us who we are and whose we are - “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” - through a drama of 5 great Divine Acts. Creating and then Preserving the Fallen World, Choosing Israel, Coming in Christ, Sending his Spirit and Renewing all Creation. Our mission is to interpret our stories, our experiences, our cultures in the light of this drama. To perform it and invite others to join it. We therefore need to enact that drama faithfully in different areas of life guided by the biblical witness.

So, **third** level – Who are we and how are we to live as bodily, sexed and sexual beings?

Act One. In Genesis 1 we see every human being – whatever our sex or sexuality – has the dignity of being God’s image bearer. We see it’s good we’re embodied and good this embodiment differentiates us as male and female. As male and female we’re called together to image God in ruling his world and bringing forth more creatures in God’s image. Genesis 2 shows God’s response to what is not good – the original *adam* is alone. God’s differentiating work establishes our mutuality as male and female and the reunion of one man and one woman in marriage – the two shall become one flesh.

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Act Two. In the Old Testament God works through messy marriages and families and also shapes Israel to be different and a carrier of blessing to the nations. The law therefore regulates sexual behaviour and the prophets warn about sexual immorality. And God takes the created good of marriage and makes it a redemptive sign of his covenant love.

And then – Act Three – God enters the drama. Jesus reaffirms God’s creation purposes. In Matthew 19.4-6 he brings together the created reality of male and female in Genesis 1 with the social reality of marriage from Gen 2. He reiterates God’s demands for sexual purity. But he also welcomes the outcast and sinner and transforms them through radical inclusion and as the true human – very counterculturally – he’s single and calls some of his disciples to embrace celibacy.

In Act Four, the inclusion goes further. Gentiles are welcomed but they must refrain from sexual immorality, a recurring theme in apostolic teaching rooted in the gospel truth that our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit destined for resurrection. Corinth’s sexual culture was remarkably similar to ours. The church there welcomed and included the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who have sex with men. They were given a new identity and transformed – “that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”. Transformed to live faithfully in marriage – which now points to the union of Christ and his church – or in abstinence from sex which witnesses to

Act Five – the new creation where Jesus teaches there will be no human marriage but Christ’s bride shares in the union of the new heaven and earth at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Scripture from beginning to end therefore holds out the good of marriage between one man and one woman as the proper place for sexual union and then in Christ opens up the calling to live beyond marriage and sex.

So, what, at a **fourth** level about homosexuality? The key texts are discussed in the resources. I want simply to note what can get lost in the detail. The number of specific texts is small but they’re

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consistently negative. There's no canonical diversity as in other areas where we disagree. They're about sexual behaviour not certain groups of people and Scripture also has positive models of same-sex love and friendship. They come from diverse genres in both Testaments and are theologically interpreted in Romans 1. In short, Scripture uniformly presents same-sex sexual behaviour as a form of sexual immorality. We must wrestle with whether we've misunderstood these texts but we must also locate them in my earlier three levels. Do they fit and make sense within these? I believe they do. Can we disregard them and leave those other levels and Scripture's authority unaffected? I don't believe we can.

But globally to locally we disagree. How might Scripture speak into our disagreements? In closing I want to come back to Jesus and the woman caught in adultery and where we might agree and the implications of our disagreements.

First, can we follow one of the Communion's best recent initiatives - "Don't Throw Stones"? Across our disagreements can we work together to repent of and combat all victimisation and diminishment of homosexual people especially when people 'throw stones' – both literally and metaphorically - at them?

Second, "neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin" gives the gospel in summary. But many – not just LGBT people – can hear the biblical vision saying "I condemn you - go away now". For me the real challenge and conversation should be how we present and live the positive biblical vision to demonstrate we're not saying that. But what if many *in the church* think church teaching is equivalent to saying - "I condemn you - go away now" and so a denial of the gospel? Their response is to change the apostolic teaching and practice as we've received it in relation to marriage and sex. But for most Anglicans and other Christians worldwide that's equivalent to saying not "Go now and leave your life of sin" – the gospel call to repent – but "Come now so I can bless your life of sin". And that too is a denial of the gospel.

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If our disagreements over sexuality go that deep then we need to return to Ephesians 4 - "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace". But if they go that deep do we also need to wrestle with the implication of Jesus' warning that "any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall"?