

Handling Scripture in the debates about sexuality

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There is no doubt this is an extraordinarily painful time

- painful for individuals
- painful also for the Church
- for many the issues seem to go as deep as the Gospel itself
 - those on both sides
 - both liberals *and conservatives*, both conservatives *and liberals*
- the question is whether this is the pain of separation, of impending divorce
- or whether we might dare to hope, that this is not the pain of separation, but the pain of childbirth?
 - dare we hope for a miraculous gift of new life that none of us expected or predicted?

I want to outline two wrong approaches to thinking about the use of Scripture in our debates about sexuality:

- first: to assume that what the Bible has to say about same-sex relationships is to be found primarily in the 6-7 texts, the ‘clobber’ texts (Gen 19, Lev, Rom 1, etc.)
 - the task then is to reaffirm, or to attempt to get around, whatever they appear to say
 - this fails to get at the deeper layers of Biblical thought about sexuality, of which these are isolated moments
 - not unimportant moments, to be sure, but not the only ones
 - might it be that the Bible itself offers us a deeper story from within its overarching theological narrative which points in a different direction?
 - might it be that while the Bible itself does not envisage same-sex sexual relationships, yet it provides us with the resources to do so?
- the second wrong approach is to assume that since the love command is the fulfilment of the law, so whatever makes for loving relationships, irrespective of gender, must be all right
 - I have many concerns with this kind of approach – not least that it seems to deny the significance of ‘male and female made he them’
 - but one of my deepest concerns is that it is too easily complicit with secular, consumerist understandings of sexual relationships
 - is the question what fulfils me, or is the question how through my relationships I may be a blessing to others?
 - the question is not simply what I get out of my relationships, but how they can be a means of fruitfulness and holiness

- the first two goods of marriage (permanence and faithfulness) are by themselves inadequate

What then are the deeper themes in Scripture which might help us think about same-sex relationships?

Start with a basic claim: the fundamental reason the Bible is against same-sex sexual relationships is not because they are same-sex, but because they are non-procreative.

Why does this matter?

- for the Old Testament people of God, the sign of God's blessing is having children – God's covenant promise to Abraham is that he will be the father of many nations, he and his offspring after him
 - Jewish identity is fundamentally related to sharing in the lineage that goes back to Abraham
- for Christians however Christian identity is found not by sharing in the blood line going back to Abraham, but sharing in the blood of Christ
 - who are my mother and my brothers? whoever does the will of my Father in heaven (Matt 12.48-50)
 - one becomes a Christian not by birth but by baptism
 - God's promises to Abraham are fulfilled in Christ, and procreation is no longer necessary for those who are in Christ
- since having children is no longer necessary for Christian identity or fulfilment this opens up a place for celibacy – thus Jesus and Paul
 - historically, this led to two callings, marriage (i.e. open to children) and celibacy

The question I want to ask is this:

- is celibacy the only alternative to marriage?
- could we envisage faithful, permanent relationships which are not procreative, but which are sexual in nature?
- for human beings to be in faithful, permanent relationship remains a good:
 - it remains the case that it is not good for *adam* to be alone
 - so we may certainly envisage particular, non-procreative relationships, including between two people of the same sex
- but could such non-procreative relationships be sexual?
 - my answer is yes, and the reason is quite simply that in the Church of England we allow contraception in marriage
 - the moment one concedes that contraception is permissible in marriage, one allows that in principle sex has other purposes, other goods, separable from its connection with having children

- what those purposes are can be discussed – strengthening the bond of the relationship, deepening one’s knowledge and love of one’s partner, or whatever
- but the point is that contraception implies that sex does not have to be procreative in nature

These relationships, which I call covenant partnerships (and incidentally could be heterosexual or same-sex), would be marked by three goods:

- instead of the faithfulness, permanence and openness to procreation that were the traditional goods of marriage
 - instead CPs marked by faithfulness, permanence and fruitfulness
- what would fruitfulness mean in practice?
 - adopting and fostering children
 - sharing God’s love in mission contexts where having children might be problematic
 - sharing God’s love in LGBT subcultures
 - devoting time to environmental causes
 - opening one’s house in hospitality
 - etc., etc.

Lots of questions raised, some of which are addressed in my book

- notably, what is the relationship of these CPs to marriage?
 - they are the eschatological fulfilment of marriage
 - always implicit in the OT, going right back to Gen. 2
 - the point is that the deeper meaning of procreation is fruitfulness
 - Gen 2 (Adam has helper to make the earth fruitful), Is 54.1, 1 Cor 7 (anxious about the affairs of the Lord), etc.

The reason I emphasize fruitfulness is that since the sexual revolution of the 60s the Church has been reeling from our culture’s changes in sexual mores

- truthfully we have *no idea* how our teaching on sexual ethics could be good news for people, particularly for LGBT people
 - in stark contrast to the Church’s pronouncements on social and economic ethics, where the idea that they are good news gets a much more receptive audience
- we have got to find a way of imagining sexual ethics in a way that might be genuinely attractive to people, yet without remotely selling out to secular norms
- and I suggest that witnessing to sexual relationships which are faithful, permanent, and fruitful, might be one way of doing just that

The final aim: not that everyone agrees on *the* correct interpretation of Scripture – if it makes sense to talk of such a thing

- but that we recognize that there are other positions than the conservative one
 - which are working out of the deep structures of Biblical thought
 - which are *not* introducing extra-Biblical categories
 - and yet do not reach a traditional conservative conclusion
 - in other words that there is legitimate diversity
- If we were to recognize that, then we would have reason to continue to walk together, despite our differences

The points I made in the discussion following the presentations included the following:

- Christian teaching on just war is a good example of a case where the traditional teaching of the main churches is at variance with the New Testament; the NT very clearly appears to condemn fighting – there is ‘not a syllable in the Pauline letters that can be cited in support of Christians employing violence’ (Richard Hays, NT scholar), nor in the Synoptics or anywhere else in the NT – yet we still think Christians can justify going to war, based on Augustine’s use of the love command to defend the use of force in war (the argument is that love demands that we defend the weaker neighbour, using the sword if necessary)
 - the question then is not whether the NT condemns a practice, but what its reasons are for doing so, and whether it provides the resources for taking up a contrary position
- my approach to the role of Scripture in ethics is summed up in Karl Barth’s saying that Christian theology ‘does not ask what the prophets and apostles said but what we must say on the basis of the prophets and apostles’
 - it is not simply a matter of reading the Bible, but also of asking how it applies to what we must teach now
- I am unhappy with the saying that all our interpretations of Scripture are cultural, if that is taken to imply that they are all equally subjective or relative: some readings of Scripture really are better than others

The book I refer to is Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (SCM, 2014)