

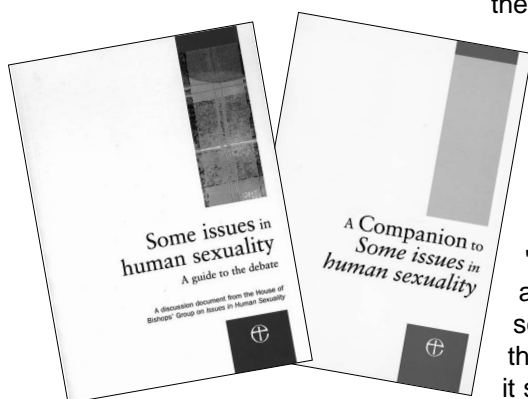
11th February 2004 - 2.30

**'That this Synod do take note of this report.
That this Synod commend Some Issues in Human Sexuality
to the Church for study and reflection.'**

SOME ISSUES IN HUMAN SEXUALITY – SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS FROM LGCM

'Some Issues in Human Sexuality' shows there are two differing and authentic voices in the Church of England today, but that is the sole authenticity this document can lay claim to.

No one believes this is the authentic voice of the majority of English Bishops or the English Church. Only a small minority would advocate its predominantly "guidebook" approach to scripture, and the conclusions it supports.



All know the issue of human sexuality has driven intellectual honesty into the deepest and darkest corners of our Episcopal palaces, as fear now reigns as the legacy of the Jeffrey John fiasco.

There is a Christian solution to these apparently diametrically opposed views, it is a solution based on prayer and listening, not schism and threats. But without truth, this debate will never be revealing or healing, it will continue to be divisive and brutal.

Some Issues is perilously flawed, not just by its mistakes and inaccuracies, but by its overall tone and desperate desire to support the rejection of homosexual people for the sake of a falsely believed political necessity.

We urgently need our bishops to exercise a methodology that sees peace and harmony achievable without sacrificing their own integrity or forcing lesbian and gay Christians to a life without the intimacy of loving relationship, even as a short term expediency.

Here **Adrian Thatcher** highlights the shortcomings of the work that is said to be the Bishops' thinking.

Summary and Conclusion

The Guide

- plays into the hands of the conservatives.
- ignores the links between homophobia and Christian doctrine.
- is selective and partial in its description of the background to the debate (1.1-1.2).
- sets up incompatible views of the Bible, and then privileges one over the other (2).
- Its 'theology of sexuality' is a defence of a pre-modern estimation of Genesis 1 (3).
- When it gets round to contemporary theological thinking (3.6) it doesn't know what to do with it, so it dissipates it with a surfeit of rhetorical questions (e.g., 5.7 – 5.7).
- It underplays the revisionism of the church's teaching about marriage and divorce in order to disguise its unwillingness to revise its stance on lesbian and gay people.
- The church as a whole, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual Christians in particular, deserve better.
- The church and General Synod should engage in issues raised by the **Manchester Statement: A Theological Reflection Anglicans and Homosexuality** (LGCM, 2003)

ANGLICAN MATTERS

**LESBIAN + GAY
CHRISTIANS**
and our friends

Comments on Chapter 1 The current debate on sexuality

The description of 'the background' is full of selective omission. There is no mention of e.g., the huge influence of Michel Foucault on contemporary understandings of sexuality, or Anthony Giddens' analysis of 'the transformation of intimacy',¹ or indeed of any social theory whatever. There is no mention of 'postmodernity'² and the insights provided by 'postmodern' thinkers seeking to explain the felt discontinuities between our period and earlier ones. Feminism might just as well not have happened (inevitable in a report by bishops?). A theological approach to these changes might have recognised the movement of the Spirit of God outside the churches, bringing out the slow dismantling of racism, sexism, and patriarchy, and the rise of equal opportunities and human rights.

There is no reference here, and almost no reference in the Guide, to homophobia, the existence of which in church and society is virtually erased.³ In fact the silence about homophobia is deafening. Consequently the contribution of Christian teaching to its manifestation is also hidden from view. Perhaps one of the reasons why the Church is slower to accept change with regard to homosexuality than with regard to, say, the purposes of marriage, (1.2.62-65) is because there is widespread homophobia within the church, with denial or occlusion one of its principal signs.

Nearly half of the section on 'changes in the church' (1.2) is devoted, not to changes in the church at all, but to describing the traditional position that confines sexual intercourse to heterosexual marriage. This is not the only time that readers will encounter a mis-match between the titles, and the content that is presented.

The 'device' of 'core beliefs' in sexual ethics (1.2.5-19) is used, in order to show that the recognition of same-sex partnerships would be inconsistent with these. Who says they are core? Doesn't the church's developing teaching and practice with regard to marriage arguably infringe these anyway?

Comments on Chapter 2 The use of the Bible in sexual ethics

The Introduction (2.1) sets out two views of the Bible, both of which it advocates. Anglicans, the bishops explain, see the Bible 'as providing normative guidance for their sexual conduct' (2.1.1). And they see it this way because of the status they give 'to the Bible as a whole as pointing to Christ, through whom God has revealed to his people what he is like, what he has done for them, and how they should respond to him'. (2.1.2) Later in the chapter these views are formally separated. The first regards the Bible 'as a witness to the grace of God' (2.5): the second regards it as 'a guide to Christian discipleship' (2.6). These views might fairly be called the 'witness' view and the 'guidebook' view.

¹Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

²When postmodern ethics are discussed later, the opportunity to utilise these analyses in the service of the gospel is passed up in favour of casual polemic. See below.

A primary source of confusion in the Guide and in the churches is the conflation of these two views. Since the Bible points to Christ, it is clearly right to speak of it as a 'witness' to him. Because Jesus is God, Jesus is God's revelation, and the Bible, like John the Baptist, is a witness to that. But when the Bible is thought to provide 'normative guidance' for the conduct of Christians, and especially their sexual conduct, it may then cease to be the witness to God's revelation in Christ, and become the revelation instead – the divine guidebook to human sexuality. The Guide is right to emphasise the status of the Bible as a witness to Christ. The issue is the status of Christ within this second, 'guidebook view' of the Bible. On many future occasions the Guide will not use the biblical text as a witness to God's revelation in Christ, but will appeal to it independently of its witness to Christ in order to arrive at allegedly 'normative guidance'.

The claim there are 'two answers' (2.2.7) to the question how the church should respond to the pluralistic context of bible-reading is an amazing over-simplification. The first is to 'stick to the belief that these texts do have specific meanings... bearing the inspiration and authority of God' (2.2.8): the second is 'to realize that the meaning of a text is created as a particular group of people reads the text in the light of its own particular traditions and beliefs...' (2.2.9). This black and white distinction then enables the Guide to misdescribe all other positions than the traditional one. The sole example of the distinction in practice just happens to be Rom.1:26-7. According to the second position 'the meaning of the text is the way we choose to read it'. But there are scores of scholarly interpreters who do not recognise these stark alternatives, whether on Rom.1:26-7 or any other passage. This innocent-looking bifurcation first lends weight to the view that biblical texts have fixed meanings, and then misrepresents alternative views as wilfully subjective. This poor move determines how the Bible will be [mis-?]used in subsequent sections.

Comments on Chapter 3 The theology of sexuality

The chapter is not about the theology of sexuality. The first 3 sections describe the Christian life as living in relationship with the triune God. Consequently, by devoting separate sections to each of the separate Persons, the profound, transsexual, transgendered, Trinitarian categories of communion, relation and person can all be deftly prevented from entering the vocabulary of the theology of sexuality. (Pope John Paul II had no reservations about comparing the 'communion of persons' (*communio personarum*) in marriage with the *communio personarum* in the divine Trinity.⁴) Instead, in a chapter entitled 'The theology of sexuality', we have a devotional account of the relation of the believer to God. We are entitled to feel cheated.

³The first of the very infrequent references to homophobia occurs at p.253. See *Christian Homophobia - The Churches' Persecution of Gay and Lesbian People* (LGCM, 2000 ISBN 0 946310 10 6)

⁴Familiaris Consortio, section 11, 'Man, the Image of the God who is Love'. See e.g., Mary Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love - A New Vision of Marriage* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp 78-9. The Guide quotes Familiaris Consortio at 3.4.26 (God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion') but the Trinitarian theology of the context is ignored.

An inordinate space has been given to the interpretation of Gen.1-2 (e.g., 3.4.8-26: 3.4.50-86). While Gen.1:26-8 is continuously important for the doctrine of the human person, it is extremely improbable that this text can bear the huge weight of interpretation that the Guide places upon this (e.g., 3.4.49: 3.4.56). The guidebook view of the Bible now predominates. Even if the conservatives were to be substantially right in insisting that Gen. 1 provides a 'framework for understanding what it means for us to be male and female before God' (3.4.8), some further argument would be needed that Genesis offers universals, not generalizations, in telling us this. In other words, the very claim that Genesis offers 'normative guidance' is to invite discussion about exceptions to the norm. Yet no exceptions are admitted.

The continued insistence both on the continued use of Genesis 1 and 2 as the final arbiter of sexual questions ('the benchmark') and on reading them as if they provided essential, universal, unalterable, divine law about the sole way men and women are to relate to each other is a possible reading. But faithfulness to the teaching of Jesus (Mt.19:3-12, Mk.10:1-12) and the use he made of these passages does not support the bishops' conclusions. Jesus appealed to the creation narratives in order to criticise the practice of the easy divorce of wives by husbands. That they might be used to proscribe homosexual sexual relations cannot be found anywhere in these texts.

Lesbian and gay Christians are likely to greet the summary of the traditional ethic as unnecessarily wounding (3.5.8). A faithful reading of tradition welcomes its eventual responsiveness to changing circumstances and needs in the light of the Spirit's guidance. There is none of that generosity of spirit here. The 'Christian sexual ethic' has been authoritatively declared. Once this apparently fixed and unbending position has been stated, the particular perplexity can be aired: where and how do lesbian and gay people 'fit into this picture' (3.5.8). Lesbian and gay people are to be problematized as awkward for the mainstream traditional Christian ethic, which, now having been authoritatively pronounced, will inevitably struggle to accommodate them.

Only in the last section of the chapter 'Some recent rereadings of the Christian tradition,' (3.6) do we learn of three (from very many) modern theologians who have written about homosexuality. They include Rowan Williams' essay 'The Body's Grace' (1989) (3.6.18-26), and his godly impatience with 'an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts, or on a problematic and non-scriptural theory about mutual complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures' (3.6.26)⁵. The critical question addressed to the aghast readers of the three chosen authors is 'what we are to make of their arguments for the legitimacy of same-sex sexual relationships in the light of the general biblical picture concerning Christian discipleship and human sexuality that we have looked at in this chapter' (3.6.37).

No effort has been made to allow the chosen theologians to influence the treatment that sexuality is given. Consequently there is little point in even allowing these writings to appear, because it is already decided that the creation narratives give us the 'general framework' or 'picture' of God's intention for human sexuality. Scripture has been elevated to judge and jury over anything that appears to develop conventional understandings of it in imaginative ways. The Guide feigns not to notice Williams' impatience with the 'problematic and non-scriptural theory about mutual complementarity'. One wonders whether this is because 'the division of humankind into two distinct but complementary sexes' is already one of the five 'core beliefs' (1.2.9) that cannot be allowed to change. The bibliocentrism of the last two chapters has eclipsed the possibility that the Spirit might be saying something new; or that tradition might be developing rapidly; or that wisdom might be found, even among lesbian and gay Christians themselves.

Comments on Chapter 4 Homosexuality and biblical teaching

The chapter is pedestrian. It proceeds by yet another examination of the 7 biblical texts that deal with it, without a critical thought about the approach that is being taken. The inconvenient narrative of David and Jonathan is ignored completely, just as the Song of Songs is completely ignored in chapter 2. If for example, the topic of slavery were to be approached in this way, the seeds of an argument that led to its eventual abolition would never have been allowed to germinate!

Robert Gagnon's antigay book is welcomed into the canon of impartial scholarship (4.3.19). Less than 2 pages is devoted to challenges to this tired theology (4.3.43). Then the vetoes kick in, protecting the conclusion 'that the consensus of scholarly opinion supports the traditional interpretation' of these texts (4.3.53). The possibility that the Holy Spirit might be inspiring the inclusion of 'non-abstaining homosexuals' (4.3.75) into the church, rather as the Spirit inspired the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 15) is snuffed out,⁶ along with the arguments of those (like James Nelson) 'that the biblical material on homosexuality as a whole is culturally conditioned and therefore no longer applicable' (4.4.34). The Bishop of Malaita's very sensible appeal to the 'witness view' of the Bible as propounded by the 1958 Lambeth Conference (4.4.37) is rejected on trivial grounds.

Round and dizzyingly round the circular argument travels. The repeated appeal to the guidebook view of the Bible, together with conventional historical interpretation of it does not permit serious discussion of alternative views of it because they challenge the guidebook view. The frequent references to this view of the Bible in chapter 2 (e.g., 4.5.1 and 4.5.4) have already attempted to settle the controversy without dealing with it.

⁵Citing *The Body's Grace* (2nd edition), Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (2002), pp 11-12.

⁶And the careful work of Stephen Fowl on this ignored (*Engaging Scripture* (Oxford, Blackwell, and Malden, Mass.: 1998).

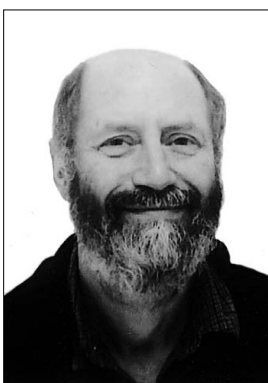
Comments on Chapter 5 Gender identity, sexual identity and theology

This is undoubtedly the best chapter. It roves over the quest for rights and the rise of feminism (5.2), secular and theological accounts of gender, the essentialist versus constructionist argument (5.3.20), some gay theologies (5.4a), and 'female sexuality' (5.4b). Even 'Some key issues in lesbian feminist theology' (5.4c) gain a hearing. The chapter provides an assemblage of contemporary authors, relevant theological themes, and dissenting voices, which encapsulate the theological breakthrough over sexuality that is happening in the churches. Yet what happens? Nothing. The response is timorous. Instead of a positive, critical, welcoming of these developments, recognising them as a contribution to the living tradition of theology, critical distance is quickly established between the bishops and these writers. This material should have been inserted in chapter 1. Why wasn't it? Because it would have been influential there, and would have foregrounded the difficulties with the traditional teaching. Instead it adopts a neutralist stance contenting itself with long lists of 'critical questions raised by the new theological thinking' (5.6.1) and 'important questions that can be addressed in return' (5.6.2).

Finally the bishops allow themselves to say 'What needs to be discussed is whether the kind of theology at which we have been looking is a legitimate development' (5.6.5). And this is exactly what they excuse themselves from doing. There is legitimate theology (the bishops'), and there is illegitimate theology (theology that is pro-gay). Sooner or later but not now, there needs to be a discussion about whether any of the pro-gay theology can be legitimised.

Comments on Chapters 6-8 Bisexuality; Transsexualism; Homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals in the life of the Church

Short chapters are devoted to bisexuality (6) and transexualism (7). At least there is an even discussion of Oliver O'Donovan's notorious view that 'human beings are either male or female because of their God-given biology and nothing a surgeon can do can alter this fact' (7.3.15).



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Chapter 8 sets the parameters for policy. Issues in Human Sexuality (1991) is summarised (8.2), followed by two opposite and token challenges (8.3), that Issues was both too radical, and not radical enough. There then follows a discussion of the pros and cons of 5 'possible responses to these challenges' (8.4). The Guide opts for 'Maintaining the present policy', together with more education, discussion, attention to the pastoral needs of lesbian and gay Christians, and the combating of homophobia (at last!)(8.4.84).

We must charitably expect elements of pragmatism and expediency in the setting of policy options. But the extent of these elements may come as a shock. The church can't 'take a more inclusive approach' (8.4.20) because it would 'conflict with the fact that the majority of scholarly and Christian opinion still sees the traditional teaching as basically valid' (8.4.24). So much for episcopal leadership! If a given majority of Christians were heretics, would heresy thereby be allowed? "The punters aren't ready for it" is a strange argument to deploy in pastoral theology and Christian ethics.

The guidebook view of the Bible is still oppressively deployed (after the rehearsal of the 'new theologies' in chapter 5 and their subsequent disappearance). Disguised as a question, it is denied that there is 'any grounding either in Scripture or the tradition of the Church for saying that a long-term homosexual relationship is ethically responsible' (8.4.44b). Closet gays would feel their pain was in vain if the church took a more liberal line (8.4.71). No liberation or redemption from false-consciousness there, then! The view is rightly ascribed to conservative evangelicals that 'it is crystal clear that the teaching of the Bible as a whole makes it impossible to see same-sex sexual relationships as anything other than a sinful deviation from God's intention for human sexuality' (8.4.74a). They 'will oppose any change... extremely strongly' (8.4.75). Nothing here about the linkage of this view with homophobia, or the fear of sexuality, or the power of sexual desire or the threat to precarious heterosexuality that suggestions of change inevitably generate.

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