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CAN THE ORDINARY PERSON UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

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Five hundred years ago the church taught that only the priest could study the Scriptures and explain them: lay people were forbidden to possess them, and in any case, they were available only in Latin. It was because they wanted to be free to read the Bible and understand it for themselves that men and women were burned at the stake in the sixteenth century.

William Tyndale was one of the early translators of the Bible into English, and in doing so he made it his aim that even the boy who follows the plough might be able to read God's Holy Word. Though he was put to death for his boldness, God answered his prayer to 'open the King of England's eyes' and within a few years of Tyndale's martyrdom Henry VIII required the English Bible to be accessible for everyone in their parish church. Ever since then it has been freely available to all in this country.

God's Word has been used in countless ways by the Holy Spirit, Who guided the writers, to impact upon its readers. Some of our readers may have heard Martin Hallett, Founder of the True Freedom Trust, telling how it was reading the Scriptures after his conversion that convinced him of the sinfulness of continuing in a practising homosexual relationship. For Martin the Bible's teaching on the subject was plain enough, and he describes movingly how conversion has not delivered him from his sexual orientation, but enabled him to lead a celibate life, which he believes is the only option for anyone in his position. Some have found that conversion has changed, among other things, their sexual orientation, but there are many like Martin for whom it has not done so. More recently the Bishop of Chester has drawn attention to the fact that some may be delivered from homosexual tendencies by counselling.

Jeffrey John, during the time that he was nominated for the bishopric of Reading, said that he was prepared to abide by the 'present position' agreed by the Lambeth Conference, which requires that clergy of homosexual orientation should maintain a celibate lifestyle. He made no secret of the fact that he would be seeking to change this ruling, claiming that the statement by the bishops at Lambeth 1998 that homosexual practice is 'incompatible with Scripture' is 'nonsense in terms of exegetical theology'. We can therefore expect an exegesis of Romans 1 and similar passages to be brought forward which will support his position. In that case, if we are no longer to understand the Scriptures in their plain sense, we shall be brought back into bondage to the claim that the Scriptures can only be understood as the scholars interpret them for us. We are then left to choose which scholars to follow.

Some have already sought to explain away the Bible's strictures on homosexual practice as being relevant to the times of the New Testament, but not any more applicable today than, for instance, the requirement for ladies to wear hats in church. But for a woman to wear her hair loose at Corinth was a mark of loose morals. There is, however, an important difference, in that the Bible's restriction of sexual intercourse to a man and woman in the covenanted relationship of marriage is one of God's ordinances at creation, and why God created us male and female.

Others are keen to point out that Jesus made no pronouncements on the subject. However, Jesus was teaching in a Jewish environment, where homosexual practice was virtually unknown, while it was rife in Rome and Corinth, so it is not surprising that Paul tackles the matter in writing to those churches (see Romans 1:18-32 and 1 Corinthians 6:9,10).

To take the Bible's position on homosexuality is not to be intolerant or homophobic, it is merely to be obedient to God's revealed will. If we are keen to follow Scriptural guidelines we shall do all we can to befriend anyone who is orientated this way and encourage and support them in living a godly lifestyle.

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