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Some Issues in Human Sexuality

David Phillips

This report, recently released by the House of Bishops is a meaty work that has taken some time to compile. It sets out to reflect the state of 'the debate' following the earlier Bishops' report *Issues in Human Sexuality*.

The report first gives a helpful summary to 'the debate'. It then considers the place of the Bible and how it's teaching should be viewed today. This chapter, chapter 2, is crucial to the whole report and it is repeatedly referred back to.

The report then considers how the biblical material has been understood in Christian tradition and looks at some of the attempts to re-read both the biblical material and the tradition in recent decades. This section is generally good and provides a helpful analysis of these attempts as well as an analysis of their failings. The report then looks at the main biblical texts. Again this is well done and whilst the report concludes that some of the texts used are not necessarily relevant several of the others cannot be explained away. Thus the report appears to conclude that despite the best efforts of some the Bible stubbornly persists in stating that monogamous heterosexual marriage is the only proper place for sexual intercourse and that homosexual sexual activity is not only wrong but also condemned. For evangelicals and any who are faithful to Anglican doctrine this might seem to settle the matter; the Bible says it is wrong, it must be wrong.

The report, however, moves on. The next three chapters cover gender identity, sexual identity, bisexuality and transsexualism. These chapters provide helpful overviews of these issues and will provide a useful guide for anyone seeking to understand what others say on the matters concerned. The final two chapters are where the rubber hits the road and these consider the place of homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals in the Church and how the Church today should respond to these issues.

After a lot of spade work the report then moves towards its conclusion. Having considered the biblical material and the issues that face us in the modern world the report looks at different ways in which these two interact and finally comes to the same practical conclusion as *Issues in Human Sexuality*. That is, since the ideal is still that sexual practice should be confined to heterosexual marriage then this is what should be expected of the clergy. The report gives no consideration to how this policy might be implemented. However, alongside this, the report concedes that where people are convinced that an active homosexual relationship is their calling from God the church should not condemn them nor put barriers to fellowship in their way. In large part the defence of this position is that all the alternatives are worse.

The eagle-eyed will notice that the report, having concluded that the traditional understanding of the biblical texts is correct, nevertheless reaches a conclusion that appears to be at odds with what the Bible says.

It has been a feature of Church of England reports in recent decades that they pay far more attention to biblical material than was common in some earlier reports. This is particularly obvious in this present report where so much attention is given to the bible and where the report repeatedly refers back to the methodology set out in chapter 2. This particular chapter is therefore key to understanding the report.

The report relies on a view of the Bible that sees it not as revelation but as a record of revelation. A key statement can be found at the start of chapter 2, section 2.1.2 describing *'the status Anglicans have given, and continue to 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.'* This statement is justified by quoting from various recent reports and also the first of the 1562 Homilies.

What is wrong with this statement? Clearly, as it says, the main purpose of Scripture is to direct us to Christ, we cannot find salvation through the Bible itself, but only through Christ (Jn 5.3). But what is the statement saying about the nature of the Bible? The Christian Church has always held that the Bible is the Word of God, not because it merely contains a record of revelation but because it is itself revelation. So, for example, the book of homilies, quoted in the report, also describes the Bible as 'the word of God', 'God's true word setting forth his glory and also man's duty' and also 'God's infallible word'. This is no invention of pious Christians it is clearly what Jesus taught about the Old Testament and therefore it is what His apostles also taught - in particular, that 'all scripture is God breathed'. The Bible is not secondary revelation it is itself the very word of God which comforts, teaches, trains, rebukes and corrects.

Why is this point so important? The liberal will argue something like "the Bible as a whole points us to Christ who is the perfect revelation of God. Of course what we have in the Bible points us to Jesus but often we have to peel back the layers a bit to find the inner core. In the Bible we have the human witness to the divine. Sometimes the human witness obscures the divine and therefore we have to work hard to see which is which." What is important for the liberal is to see from the Bible how those early disciples understood and responded to the revelation of God in Christ. That will help us learn about how we should respond to this revelation today. However, because we live in a different age, a different culture, because we understand the world differently, we may reach different conclusions as to what this revelation means for us today.

The report itself relies on putting clear water between the Bible and us. This is justified in part by the way in which the New Testament handles some of the Old Testament commands. It is clear that not all Old Testament commands apply in the New Testament era. Therefore it is argued in the report that what matters supremely are the universal principles that are embodied in the Old Testament commands. The commands themselves relate to the particulars of how these principles are to be worked out in the culture of their day. The report argues that a similar method should be applied to the New Testament. There are universal principles worked out in particular circumstances. We must separate the two so that we can see how the universal applies to our contemporary situation. This methodology is now quite common and since it was employed in justifying female presbyters it is small wonder that the group adopt it. But is it defensible?

The key to this is how the New Testament understands the Old. As Anglicans we have a clear statement on this in Article 7 of our Thirty-nine Articles and since this accords both with the clear teaching of scripture and the teaching of the Church through the ages it is quite a useful statement. Some of the commands in the Old Testament, to do with ceremonies relevant to the worship of Israel and to do with the civil ordering of the nation of Israel no longer apply. This is abundantly plain in the Bible because under the new covenant there is neither a nation of Israel nor the need for the Temple. However, the moral commandments still apply, indeed they not only still apply in the New testament they are generally tightened up rather than loosened. The fact of the changed culture and environment from the time of Moses to the time of Jesus did not invalidate the moral commands, despite the new covenant.

What on earth has changed in the days since Jesus to make us think that the moral commands are no longer applicable? Indeed we might ask the more particular question, what has happened in the last

few generations, most especially in the Europe, North America and the westernised world? The report itself demonstrates the change quite well; it is full of the accounts of re-readings of scripture. We have witnessed a plethora of theological novelty in which theologians have challenged virtually every aspect of biblical and traditional Christianity. In Europe this has been part of the dramatic decline of the Christian Church, most especially the protestant Churches. In North America although biblical Christianity survives fairly well the older denominations are also in continuing decline.

This trend has two dramatic and dreadful consequences. First, ordinary Christians are deskilled in Bible reading; we need experts to re-read it for us. The Bible may say that homosexual practice is an abomination but we cannot just believe it, we must re-interpret it for our culture. Second, the Church has lost the power to transform culture. The whole methodology relies on shaping our belief by the cultural norms of our day. In its very essence such an approach outlaws any attempt to transform the world around. Though no liberal would admit it, liberalism is concerned with finding out what the world's mould looks like and squeezing into it. Despite the evidence of a gradual transforming effect of biblical truth on cultures in Africa and Asia today and despite the historical evidence for such transformation in Europe and North Africa in the past, we no longer seem to believe that the Word of God can change the world.

Now I will be quite honest, I find this whole approach very difficult to comprehend. The report acknowledges, for example, that Leviticus 18.22 is condemning homosexual acts and stating that it is an abomination. If, as Anglicans, we believe this statement to be 'God-breathed' then we must believe that God has said that homosexual practice is an abomination. Unless we can cogently argue that in the intervening 4,000 years God has changed His mind, surely we are bound to say that homosexual practice is still an abomination to God. How then can the Bishops of the Church of England allow and even appear to commend people to continue to do something that God has declared an abomination. It is because they do not believe that Leviticus 18.22 is the Word of God, it is not 'God-breathed'. Likewise the report acknowledges that despite the efforts of many Paul is clearly saying in 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 that those who commit the various offences listed will not enter the kingdom of heaven. They acknowledge that homosexual practice is one of the things Paul lists. Yet they nevertheless are prepared to recommend the Church to permit a practice that condemns people to hell. Is 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 the word of God? If this is God's Word and not just Paul's do we have any grounds for thinking that God has changed his view over the last 2,000 years? Have we perhaps entered into a different covenant under which God has revealed something new about salvation? Surely we as Anglicans accept Article 6 at the very least and acknowledge that the Bible is the sole guide to salvation. Yet the Bible says that those who do these things will not enter the kingdom.

The error at the heart of this report is that it does not acknowledge that Scripture is God's Word. This failure makes any conclusions the report reaches entirely subjective, they rely on the composition of the group. Since the group was composed of two liberals and two moral conservatives the conclusion is a compromise. As a consequence the flock are being deceived because the Church will not speak the truth in love.

Background to 'Some Issues'

David Phillips

November saw the release of the latest offering from the House of Bishops on sexuality; a report entitled '*Some issues in human sexuality. A guide to the debate.*'

In recent decades some within the national Church have ruthlessly pursued the homosexual agenda and they have obstinately refused to accept defeat. They are unlikely to stop until they have achieved their objectives.

What are the political realities of the Church of England? On almost any issue the laity of the Church are the most conservative, the clergy more liberal and the Bishops the most liberal. Conservatives amongst the Bishops tend either to be timid, or too concerned with gospel work to get bogged down in politics. In addition, working parties are usually required to have a diverse and balanced membership. Therefore on contentious issues they are likely to have equal representation regardless of the strength of the majority view.

In 1987 after a long period of reports and discussions the General Synod adopted a motion by an overwhelming majority upholding the biblical and traditional teaching regarding sexual conduct. Although the wording was weaker than might have been hoped it did declare, amongst other things that "homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion". Some radical liberals were scandalised by this but others saw it as giving a very small crack that they might prise open further. The Bishops, apparently unhappy with the motion, set up a working party that eventually produced their report '*Issues in Human Sexuality*'. This report makes no reference to the 1987 resolution.

The Bishops did not have the courage to put *Issues* to Synod as a policy statement. However, revisionists initiated a debate on the report and a motion was passed to get the report discussed around the country. In the debate the Bishops used their power to block all amendments and then open evangelicals persuaded the Synod not to block the motion lest this look like a snub to the Bishops. As a consequence this report has been under discussion up and down the country and this has been used as an excuse for openly homosexual clergy to be given a platform even though the report says they should not be in office.

Why was a new report needed? On the positive side *Issues* was attacked from all directions. However, in terms of the revisionist agenda the tactic appears to be to keep talking until they get their way. As pointed out above, whilst it is all under discussion some Bishops see this as an excuse not to implement the proposals in relation to homosexually active clergy whilst arguing that *Issues*, and its liberal view of acceptable conduct, is the official position rather than the 1987 resolution.

The latest report, "*Some Issues in Human Sexuality*" was produced by a group of four Bishops and various advisors. Two of the Bishops are revisionist liberals. The Bishop of Oxford has taken some time to show his real colours but the escapade with Jeffrey John drew attention to what was always evident underneath. The Bishop of Guilford, who has recently moved to Chelmsford, has been gradually revealing his true position and it seems likely that there is more to be revealed in his new post. The other two, Winchester and Chester are both morally conservative and have apparently been courageous in the face of the venomous attacks of some revisionists amongst the Bishops.

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