

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Spring 2008 No. 108

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

TAKING LIBERTIES WITH TRUTH & GRACE

By David Phillips

The Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, has caused some consternation with recent remarks regarding homosexual practice and the Anglican Communion. Since his arguments are typically those we hear from liberals they seem to have come as a surprise to some.

The full paper, called "Making Space for Truth and Grace" is dated December 2007 and is on the Diocese of Liverpool website.

Keep talking

One plank of his argument is to defend the Lambeth Conference on the basis that when the Church faces difficult issues we must keep talking about them and that unless there is friendship and fellowship real discussion breaks down. He uses the example of the Council of Jerusalem as part of the justification for this claim but this is rather a misleading comparison. For one thing it appears from Acts that the Council did not go on debating the matter *ad infinitum*. Though the full debates may have taken a while longer Luke gives the impression in Acts that a resolution to the problem was reached speedily and that decision was communicated quickly. Indeed a quick and clear decision was necessary because the problem (circumcision and the law etc) was dividing people. In contrast the parts of the Anglican Communion have been debating homosexual practice for over 30 years. There seem to have been some clear statements (Lambeth 1.10 for example) and yet the discussion goes on, and on, and on. The liberal argument, advanced by James Jones, is that this matter is unresolved and will remain unresolved until we all agree with the liberals. To use the Council of Jerusalem to justify this is deeply misleading. The evangelical argument is that this matter is clear in Scripture and no amount of talking will ever make it unclear.

Being a man

The other matter that has disturbed people is the use James Jones makes of the relationship of David and Jonathan. It needs to be remembered that until people started trying to use this passage to justify homosexual practice nobody saw it in that light. What we see rather is an intimate relationship of two men which is perfectly acceptable. We have no reason to think that what David and Jonathan did was wrong. Jones mentions the fact that they kissed, yet men kissing is common place in many societies and no-one thinks it sexual. He also makes much of the statement that their love surpassed that of a woman. Yet how often do we preach that love, real love, is deeper than that portrayed in much of modern culture. When you see the words of Jesus on a war memorial 'no greater love has any man than this...' what does it mean? Surely we can say that the love of Jesus for us was deeper than the love of a man and woman without suggesting it was sexual in nature. To portray the love of David and Jonathan as being sexual and erotic in nature is to demean love.

The issue, then, is whether David and Jonathan did anything that was wrong in the sight of God. Or, more to the point, if they had done wrong, or desired to do wrong, would people today be willing to say it was wrong? Suppose that they had lain with each other 'as with a woman' (Lev 18.22), would that have been wrong? If they had desired to do so, would that desire have been wrong? We are told quite clearly in Scripture that to do this is wrong and most people have at least some conception of what this might mean in practice. Of course people worm out of this simple command by saying that we don't know what it means, but it must mean something otherwise God would not have bothered to condemn it. Those who argue that we need not obey it because the precise meaning is not spelt out in graphic detail are guilty of legalism.

What Jonathan and David did was not wrong, it shows us a deep, intimate relationship between two men that is good. But the relationship of a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage is something else. It is part of the plan of God for mankind from the beginning by which his purposes are fulfilled to fill the earth. In this relationship man and woman become one flesh and sexual union expresses this deep reality.

If David and Jonathan had sought to see their relationship as parallel to that of the one-flesh of marriage or if they had sought to imitate its sexual union, or desire that imitation, then their relationship would have been wrong, because it is condemned by God in His Word. The problem with the liberal argument is that it begins with the assumption that we must make Scripture fit our experience, rather than shaping our lives by Scriptural teaching.

David Phillips is General Secretary of Church Society.