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A RELENTLESSLY AGREEABLE GOD?

By Mel Lacy

What would it be like to live in a world where no one ever disagrees with us? Initially it would seem idyllic, perfect even! Consider a disagreement between a mother and son; the son longs to drive without a seatbelt because he finds it exhilarating and it fulfils him, his mother disagrees loudly. She does so because she loves him, establishing rules concerning the use of the car for his protection and care. He was later glad that he'd heard and heeded his mother when involved in a car crash. Love relationships always demand the forfeit of autonomy.

What about a world where God never disagrees with us? A belief commonly held by those who are both for and against same-sex relationships, is that God is love. The question then becomes, how is the love of God defined? Is it true that God loves us and can still disagree with us? Or, in fact, can God only love us, if he is always in agreement with us concerning our personal desires and search for fulfilment?

The latter appears to be precisely the kind of God that those who support same-sex relationships in the church believe in. Implicit in this belief are a number of extraordinary claims: first, that creatures always know as much as or more than the Creator and second, that the voice of God, therefore, will always concur with our own judgements. This would mean, of course, that God need never speak to us, for us to know what he thinks.

A moment of consideration will identify that the notion of a relentlessly agreeable God is senseless; not least given our personal experience in relationships with one another, where we find that there is always an element of disagreement, even in the best relationships. More significantly though given the historical revelation of scripture, where we see our God patiently rebuke, correct, and instruct his wayward people – not intent on being disagreeable but rather motivated by great covenant love.

But do we really want God to agree with us on everything? This is profoundly reductionist. This is a view of God that simply conforms him to our likeness, which is clearly contrary to the biblical precedent of Christians being conformed to the likeness of Christ. God is no longer permitted to be God; he becomes a manmade creation incapable of relationship, revelation, or transcendence. This is a God who is not just like us, but who is never any bigger than us, because his thoughts can never surpass our thoughts. Can such a little God save us?

So where does God disagree with us? Some say that scripture does speak clearly against same-sex relationships, others dispute that. Some say scripture is irrelevant whilst others say scripture cannot be clearly construed. Common in each of these responses is the silencing of God. They silence God because he can no longer address us as someone distinctly other, whose thoughts do not necessarily correspond with ours. The crucial point is that he ceases to be a God who can disagree with us. What is the silencing of God other than a power play? If God does not speak authoritatively in his world, by his word, then of course he will not disagree with us. By gagging God, the silence permits lifestyle choices made with reference only to ourselves.

But what about those who say that God does speak, but speaks to us through the presence of an internal voice negating the necessity of the external testimony of scripture? Unfortunately, this still silences God. It does so because, if we say that God speaks within us rather than to us, then we're in danger of saying that God only ever speaks through us. And moreover, if God is a God of love, why would he allow this controversy to rage, his church to be divided and his people torn apart and only

communicate his will to a small number of people? Surely he would want to do what any loving parent would do and set the record straight, once and for all.

Of course, once we speak of God's love, we realise how devastating this silencing of him is. If God is silenced, he's not just silenced on some issues, but on all. The consequence being, that we can never hear him as someone beyond us who faces us and speaks of his love, grace, peace, or mercy. If God doesn't speak, there is no gospel, no special revelation, and no incarnation. There is all the difference in the world between God as a distinct other person telling me he loves me and me speaking for him. It speaks of a self obsession that is more concerned with what I think, than what anybody else thinks, even if they're God. This is an aspect of what Luther calls '*homo incurvatus in se*' – man curved in on himself.

Surprisingly, if postmodernity has taught us anything, it's that often we don't actually believe the things we think we believe or at least not for the reasons we publicly state. It reveals to us the naïvety and fickleness of the human heart. This is precisely why God has revealed himself to us specifically in his word, about which he has declared, '*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*' (2 Timothy 3:16). These truths are foundational to the doctrine of the Church of England, as defined in Articles 6 and 20 of the *Thirty-nine Articles*.

All this means is that when we talk about God's love for us or our love for God, this should not be used to cover what is essentially an abusive power play. The way to avoid such an abusive power play towards God is to refuse to silence him, but rather recognise that in his love he speaks to us, and we love him by listening and responding. In the present debate this means that if we genuinely love God, we will go back to the biblical texts that he has given and read them humbly, recognising that from time to time he will disagree with us and seek to reform our lives. Humility is a prime virtue in this debate both because of the temptation to assume that God will never disagree with us and because of the temptation to use a biblical truth arrogantly rather than graciously.

So bearing that in mind we must return to the biblical material humbly, noting some key points. The biblical commentary on the issue of homosexual relationships is not simply restricted to a few proof texts; it is deeply woven through the whole counsel of God.

At creation God establishes man and woman made in his own image, by him and for him. Mirroring the relational nature of our Trinitarian God, we are made to enjoy and benefit from being in relationship with one another and with God. God commanded his creatures to '*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it*' (Genesis 1:28a). Marriage was established as the norm and was to form the context for a permanent, loving, intimate, sexual relationship between one man and one woman and the environment for the procreation and nurture of children.

At the fall, when humanity first chose to silence God and follow their own desires, life in its totality became tainted by sin. All relationships became frustrated both vertically between man and God and horizontally between man and woman. Human sexuality was not immune to the effects of sin and a most detailed example of the fallenness of human sexuality is found in Genesis chapter 19.

Scripture, henceforth, consistently condemns homosexual acts (as distinct from a homosexual orientation) and sexual same-sex relationships. Paul, in his epistles, clearly denounces such relationships as that which are completely contrary to God's created order rather than merely counter-cultural, as some will argue.

God is love, epitomised in the sending and sacrifice of his son who dying and living declared God's love and gave us grace. In him alone we find fulfilment and satisfaction.

Will we let God speak?

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