

Elevating the Conversation: Christians discussing homosexuality

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My aim in what follows is two-fold. First and most fully I want to propose a framework for discussion and conversation. I hope and believe this will not only shed some light on why we find it hard as Christians to discuss homosexuality well but also that it might provide something most Christians – whatever their views on aspects of the homosexuality debate – can accept as some sort of common ground. Then, in the light of that, I want to suggest some basic principles for how we could discuss the subject in a better way than we often have done.

I – A Possible Framework

First, then, a possible framework for approaching discussion of homosexuality as Christians. Here we need to try and see the big picture. In particular, we need to set debates such as those which have erupted in recent weeks over Greenbelt's stance in a missional context which honestly acknowledges four key realities: the personal lived human reality, the social reality, the ecclesial reality of the Christian church and the biblical reality. I will say a little about each of those in a moment but the first step is to see that all four of these shape the framework for our discussion. Given these four realities – the personal, the social, the ecclesial and the biblical – the big picture missional question in relation to homosexuality is *how is the church faithful to the Bible as it seeks to understand and share the good news of Jesus with gay and lesbian people and make the lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God visible in society today?*

I sense that most Christians across the liberal-conservative or revisionist-traditionalist or any other spectrum or set of labels are at base seeking to answer something like that question: how is the church faithful to the Bible as it seeks to understand and share the good news of Jesus with gay and lesbian people and make the lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God visible in society today?

Of course some of us think some others are not really serious about being faithful to the Bible. Some of us are not convinced that some others really want to share the gospel with the gay and lesbian community. That's partly why the conversation often degenerates and needs elevating. That's partly why rather than *discussing* homosexuality we normally find

ourselves *debating, disputing and disagreeing* over homosexuality. I think, however, that almost all those Christians I've talked with – from the far right to the far left – would be happy with putting a question like this centre stage.

There are, of course, all sorts of other questions which can take centre stage when as Christians we discuss homosexuality:

- Can a faithful Christian form a civil partnership?
- Does the Bible condemn all homosexual practice?
- Should the church view same-sex unions as holy, bless them and ordain those in them?
- Should gay and lesbian people seek to become heterosexual?
- Should the Church oppose any attempt to institute gay marriage in society?

I am not suggesting these are unimportant and have to be taken off the stage. Far from it, as a Christian ethicist they are part of what keeps me in business! But you will notice they are all simple either/or, “answer yes or answer no” type of questions. I actually typed “answer now” there and they are often that sort of question as well! What I am suggesting is that we will address these contentious issues better, our conversation about them will be elevated and our mission as a whole will be more faithful if we frame questions such as these within this wider missional question and focus them through it.

We may also find that in wrestling with that wider question we are able to be more honest with each other about the four realities I identified earlier – the personal, the social, the ecclesial and the biblical. Part of the reason we struggle as Christians discussing homosexuality is that I think all of us find in at least one of these areas something we find difficult to come to terms with. Something we regret or resent or resist. Something we maybe wish wasn't as it actually is. And so we seek to ignore it or downplay it, we mask the emotions it creates and we find it difficult when other Christians remind us of it. Let me try and explain by unpacking each of the four realities a little.

First, what I've referred to as the **personal lived human reality** of homosexuality. At its simplest this means that part of many people's human experience, part of many Christians' human experience, are experiences of attraction to, desire for, falling in love with and sharing love with, someone of the same sex. This is, of course, not an experience which is new to our time in history. But it is one which is raised in church and society in new ways today and one which is arguably experienced personally in new ways. In the words of Professor Oliver O'Donovan in his [“Good News for Gay Christians”](#), first published by Fulcrum online and now published in “A Conversation Waiting to Begin”:

The world has never seen a phenomenon like the contemporary gay consciousness. There have been various patterns of homosexuality in various cultures, but none with the constellation of features and the persistent self-assertion that this one presents.

We also need to recognise the complexity of this personal lived reality. Some people's experience is positive. Others' experience is negative. Some have never known anything similar in relation to someone of the opposite sex even if they have sought it with tears and prayers and therapy. Others have, to varying degrees, sometimes after great effort and struggle, sometimes much to their surprise, experienced heterosexual attraction and love and fulfilment with someone of the opposite sex. Some have understood this aspect of their experience to be a central defining feature of their personality and identify as "gay" or "lesbian", others have rejected such an identity as false, even idolatrous, perhaps calling themselves "ex-gay" or "post-gay". Sadly across that complexity and diversity one very common feature is that of being hurt by or alienated from or fearful of the Christian church, and perhaps especially evangelical Christians.

In my view, a large part of the problem in Christian discussion of homosexuality is our failure to face this personal lived reality and yet if the issue is to be addressed in missional, pastoral and discipleship terms that failure is fatal. Our discussion and conversation here can fail in various ways. At times we simply treat the subject as an abstract, intellectual, political, hermeneutical, ethical or policy issue. We then seem to forget we are talking about some of the deepest and sometimes some of the most painful experiences of people made in God's image for whom Christ died. At times we demonstrate this by simply talking about "homosexuality" rather than listening to those who live it. At times we avoid that trap of total abstraction but then simply welcome those whose experience and personal story fits with what we want to hear and confirms our own prejudices. If the church is to discern how to understand and share the good news of Jesus with gay and lesbian people then it needs to face this first, personal lived reality in all its complexity and diversity.

Second, and obviously closely related as all of us are persons-in-community, there is the **social reality**. Here we need to recognise the great diversity of social realities globally – a major factor in controversies in the Anglican Communion. And again we need to recognise the significance of that from a missional perspective. We need to be aware that what we believe essential for mission in our society may damage the church's mission in another society. But I want to focus here on our own social reality and how radically and dramatically it has changed.

Until the year that I was born, 1967, all male homosexual acts – even consensual acts between adults over 21 in private – were criminal offences. Many gay men were thus liable to imprisonment, social stigma and, of course, blackmail. Many Christians, including the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, campaigned for de-criminalisation. But the world they sought to create was very different from the one we now live in. A leading Parliamentary campaigner for the change – Lord Arran – horrified many of the gay and lesbian people he had worked with by his closing words in the House of Lords debate. Proudly proclaiming that decriminalisation marked the end of the long road, red with monstrous martyrdoms, of which Oscar Wilde had spoken, he said:

I ask one thing and I ask it earnestly. I ask those who have, as it were, been in bondage and for whom the prison doors are now open to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity. This is no occasion for jubilation; certainly not for celebration. Any form of ostentatious behaviour now, or in the future, any form of public flaunting, would be utterly distasteful and would, I believe, make the sponsors of the Bill regret that they have done what they have done. Homosexuals must continue to remember that while there may be nothing bad in being a homosexual, there is certainly nothing good. Lest the opponents of the Bill think that a new freedom, a new privileged class, has been created, let me remind them that no amount of legislation will prevent homosexuals from being the subject of dislike and derision or at best of pity.

Hard now to imagine those as the words of one of the leading progressive advocates for reforming the law!

Over the summer I read Andy Beckett's fascinating "When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies". In it he gives some attention to what happened that following decade. There the following passage – words from three years later – jumped out at me:

We have...drawn up the following list of immediate demands.

- *that all discrimination against gay people, male and female, by the law, by employers, and by society at large, should end.*
- *that all people who feel attracted to a member of their own sex be taught that such feelings are perfectly valid.*
- *that sex education in schools stop being exclusively heterosexual.*
- *that psychiatrists stop treating homosexuality as though it were a sickness, thereby giving gay people senseless guilt complexes.*

- *that gay people be as legally free to contact other gay people, through newspaper ads, on the streets and by any other means they may want as are heterosexuals, and that police harassment should cease right now.*
- *that employers should no longer be allowed to discriminate against anyone on account of their sexual preferences.*
- *that the age of consent for gay males be reduced to the same as for straight.*
- *that gay people be free to hold hands and kiss in public, as are heterosexuals.*

Those words, much more than Lord Arran's, sound like our social reality. Where did they come from? Apparently if you look carefully near the foot of Highbury Fields in North London, you will find a matt black bronze commemorative plaque which reads "The first gay rights demonstration in Britain took place here, in Highbury Fields, on 27th November 1970, when 150 members of the Gay Liberation Front held a torchlight rally against police harassment". Beckett describes how – in the words of the GLF newspaper, *Come Together*, "150 beautiful gay people" in multicoloured capes, flares and stage costumes shouted, chanted, smoked joints and played music as they marched into Highbury Fields and read out those demands.

Less than forty years later those demands have basically all been met. That is our new social reality. And what is more, despite Lord Arran's belief that "no amount of legislation will prevent homosexuals from being the subject of dislike and derision or at best of pity", there is little or no social or political appetite to reverse those developments. Beckett notes the plaque was unveiled in 2000 "was recorded by the right-wing tabloids without complaint" (p. 210). Some Christians will welcome many or all those changes, be ashamed the church generally resisted them and believe the church's calling now is to embrace them and implement them also in church life as part of the inclusive message of the gospel. Other Christians will mourn or be angered or protest but perhaps believe that an organised vocal Christian minority can and should move society as radically and swiftly as the GLF minority did but in the opposite direction.

Whatever our assessment, in the light of this social reality we must face two stark facts as Christians if we are serious about understanding and sharing the good news of Jesus with gay and lesbian people and making the lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God visible in society today. *First fact* – there has been a monumental shift in societal attitudes about sex in general and homosexuality in particular. We must avoid denial about it and realise we discuss sexuality in the aftermath of a major social and cultural revolution that has impacted us all. The words of the GLF that were radical, extreme and offensive in the Britain

of the early 70s are now almost commonplaces in much of our society. In contrast, the commonplaces of traditional Christian teaching are now viewed as radical, extreme and offensive in 21st century British society. Whether or not *what* we say in this area should change, *how* we say it and discuss it must be reconsidered in the light of this new social reality. *Second fact* – the depth and speed of this change is highly significant. It may be a sign that it is not deep-rooted but all the signs are that this is the sort of social reality into which we will be sent in mission for at least a generation and possibly much, much longer. We need therefore to go beyond debates about homosexuality and try to understand how and why such a radical social change has occurred so rapidly and develop a Christian response at a deeper level. Here is not the place to explore it further but I'd recommend the analysis of Dale Kuehne's recent "Sex and the iWorld" as a good starting point.

Third, as our question begins "How is the church...?" there is the **ecclesial** reality we must face. Here I simply want to signal five aspects of the reality of the church's situation. Again I think we probably have a lot of agreement on the facts but we often do not name them or address them directly. We often even deny them. Furthermore, the strong emotions they often engender in us – such feelings as shame and anger and especially fear – often damage our attempts at conversation both within the church and between the church and wider society.

REALITY ONE: The church has a fairly strong and consistent tradition over 2,000 years in terms of its teaching on human sexuality, including a tying of sexual intimacy to the institution of marriage and a negative stance to homosexuality. That tradition is, however, also often marked by negative attitudes and responses to sexuality, especially in relation to women and sexual minorities, negative attitudes and responses that are not only antithetical to contemporary society but make even many "traditionalists" in the church feel uneasy.

REALITY TWO: A combination of our belief in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" and the realities of globalisation mean that our discussion of homosexuality in relation to church life and the church's mission cannot simply consider our own local or national or regional social context. As in so many other areas we need to think globally as we act locally.

REALITY THREE: In that global church and particularly within the Western (or Northern) world, there are a variety of patterns of life being followed by disciples of Jesus in relation to homosexuality and a diversity of belief among Christians in relation to understanding homosexuality and how the church should respond. I think it is still legitimate to speak of a clear consensus when we understand the church ecumenically and globally and

certainly historically. The reality is, however, that that consensus in both theory and practice is to varying degrees being questioned or even collapsing in many denominations, local churches and Christian networks. That situation of disagreement, diversity, flux and development is yet another unsettling reality which is simply not going to disappear and clearly lies behind recent controversies in relation to Greenbelt.

REALITY FOUR: This changing situation threatens the unity of existing church structures and could lead to major fractures and realignments. We've seen that already within North American Anglicanism and perhaps more widely within the Anglican Communion. It looms on the horizon in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland after its recent General Assembly. It may shortly erupt also within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Church of England is aware of its own internal tensions which are exacerbated by tensions in the Communion and ecumenical relationships with churches such as the Church of Sweden.

REALITY FIVE: Given the social realities we just noted, the secular West – especially those within it who identify as gay or lesbian – views the church with a mix of amusement, incredulity, hurt, fear, anger and despair. While I think there is some truth in the claim that the church is having to wrestle with deep issues that wider society has simply failed to address in its recent rapid changes, few outside the church look on it in those terms. To be honest, the way we often seem to wrestle more with each other than with the deep issues, doesn't help. The challenge, given this reality, is how we avoid our Christian “conversations” and “discussions” simply distracting or even alienating people from Jesus and the good news we have to share.

These then are five ecclesial realities which shape both the tone and the substance of our conversations and discussions. We must be aware of these as we ask how as the body of Christ we are to understand and share the good news of Jesus with gay and lesbian people and make the lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God visible in society today. But the church cannot answer that question simply by facing the reality of its own life and the life of society and individuals within it. The question asked how the church was to do this faithful to the Bible and so alongside these three realities

The **fourth** and final reality is the **biblical** reality. Here again I can only be brief and once more flag what I see as three key features of reality we cannot ignore.

FIRST FEATURE – If one asks the question whether the biblical writers disapprove of those same-sex activities to which they refer, then, in the words of OT scholar, Walter Moberly, ‘the answer is a straightforward and uncontroversial “Yes”’. There may be debate about whether the biblical writers were referring to the precise kind of homosexual practice

which is now being advocated but that they speak against any homosexual practice they mention is beyond dispute.

SECOND FEATURE – In addition to the universally negative texts about homosexuality in both OT & NT, Scripture (and subsequent Christian theology) also emphasises:

- the importance of our bodiliness,
- the significance our sexual differentiation as humans made male and female in God's image
- the created institution of marriage and its deep symbolism in redemption and
- the seriousness of sexual immorality.

Part of our mission in society is sharing Scripture's vision for human flourishing as sexual beings and seeking to en-flesh that vision in the life of the Christian community. A mission perspective therefore means that these biblical realities cannot be ignored, even if they do now seem alien to those with whom we share the good news of the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ.

THIRD FEATURE – Scripture reveals – supremely in Christ but also in the apostolic church – that faithfulness to God's mission is frequently marked by two features:

(1) associating with, identifying with and welcoming in God's name, individuals and groups of people who many believers thought Scripture and tradition required them to distance themselves from, oppose and rebuke and

(2) facing opposition and even persecution. This can come both from within God's people and from individuals and powerful forces in the world we seek to serve and to call to repentance, faith and discipleship.

I recognise of course that what I've said has been selective and inevitably some of those selections and some of the sub-points will be disputed but let me just remind you of my basic point. If we want to discuss homosexuality better as Christians, if we want to elevate the conversation, then we need to see if we can set specific questions in a wider agreed missional frame. I suggested that what most people across various divides are trying to do is to engage with four realities – the personal, the social, the ecclesial and the biblical – in order to discern how the church is faithful to the Bible as it seeks to understand and share the good news of Jesus with gay and lesbian people and make the lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God visible in society today. I then spelled out some of the features of those four realities

that we all need to face and talk about and pray about together if we are to discern and share together in God's mission today, especially his mission to and within the gay and lesbian communities.

But elevating the conversation requires more than reframing and refocusing it in this way. It also requires thinking about *how* we talk and discuss. Reframing and refocusing will hopefully lead to some new issues being discussed and perhaps open new and even shared perspectives on old issues. But I am well aware it may also just bring to the surface other – perhaps deeper – differences. What might a more elevated conversation in this missional framework look and sound like given those four different realities? I want to close by just suggesting seven questions that would – if we took them seriously – make our conversation more Christ-like and even make our conversation itself part of God's mission.

II – Guidelines for elevating the conversation

First, how can we make our conversation and discussion more relational? Much of the problem at present is that protagonists often address each other via blogs and web-sites and emails and the nearest there is to a genuine human face-to-face encounter is in a television studio or across a synod debating chamber. Most of us will know that our deepest – and also sometimes our most painful – conversations with those we disagree with occur when they are in the context of a long-standing friendship. God wonderfully creates such situations sometimes between existing friends but often we face the harder task of building friendships across divides to create such a fruitful context. Finding time to socialise and relax with those Christians whose views are different from ours and with non-Christian GLBT people is therefore I think often the first necessary step. Here again Andrew Marin's book is such an important guide as to how we might "elevate the conversation".

Second, and related, how can we work together and make common cause across our differences? For me one of the most encouraging developments amidst much discouragement in Anglican Communion matters was how, in part building on friendships and relationships that had already developed, a group of us across the Anglican divides could work together to launch Don't Throw Stones to encourage Anglicans to take seriously the Primates' clear statement that 'the victimisation or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex is anathema to us'. We often don't realise it but thankfully in most Christian communities people with different understandings and approaches on homosexuality still regularly worship, pastor and evangelise together.

Third, how do I do justice to those with whom I disagree? So often we approach issues in a confrontational, winner-takes-all, no-holds-barred form of debating, shaped by the House of Commons or the media or barristers in a court of law. It is remarkably easy to present caricatures and focus on the most outrageous or weakest statements of those who hold a different view. We need to find ways in which we can be honest about where there is common ground without feeling we are letting “our side” down. We need to try to develop more of a hermeneutics of charity that assumes the best and engages with the best arguments of those we might see as opponents. We need to detox from the highly prevalent hermeneutics of suspicion or even malice that assumes the worst and refuses to trust.

Fourth, how do I avoid getting totally bogged down in unimportant and fruitless debates or caught out by damaging Yes/No questions that close down dialogue? This is undoubtedly one of the most difficult areas in relation to homosexuality. Part of trying to reframe the discussion was to try to get away from some of those hot-button issues which easily take centre stage. As Andrew Marin again shows there is here both a vital need if we are to reach out as Christians to the GLBT community and there is good precedent – according to the gospels – in Jesus’ own approach when confronted with stark and divisive Yes/No questions.

Fifth, how do I state my own understanding of biblical teaching and the pattern of God’s call and mission as creatively, positively and generously as possible? It is important that we don’t allow “political correctness” or fear of church hierarchies to prevent us discussing contentious issues. We must not be prevented from saying what we believe and where necessary stating that something is wrong and needs to change, to be opposed, to be resisted. Again, at times we will have little choice and there is also good precedent here in Jesus’ own approach. But some of us very easily set out our position in an oppositional and confrontational manner or a manner that simply “rallies the troops”. While again there may at times be situations when such an approach is necessary, these styles of speaking seem at present to risk becoming the norm rather than the exception and such an approach rarely elevates the conversation or facilitates discussion.

Sixth, how will what I am saying be heard by GLBT people including GLBT Christians who hold a different view? Given the range of experience I noted under the personal reality, this is a real challenge for all of us. How does someone supporting same-sex relationships do so in a way that respects the integrity of a gay Christian who views them as a temptation to be resisted as they struggle to be faithful to what they understand as Scripture’s call for abstinence? How can they be enabled to engage in the discussion by the way the view

is expressed? Similarly, how does someone who believes God's purpose is for sex to be only between a man and woman married to each other express that in a way that can be heard by someone who has for decades been in a faithful, loving same-sex partnership?

Seventh, and finally and most importantly, how is both *what* I say and *how* I say it able to make Christ known to those who hear me? How can it be heard as gospel, as good news?

If seven questions are too many let me conclude with three biblical passages that in a sense capture most of what I think these questions seek to enable. Two are obvious. *First*, from the heart of Jesus' teaching, in all we say, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". *Second*, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians – "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace....speak the truth in love". The *third* text is perhaps less obvious but I have long felt it addresses a key issue affecting most of us when we discuss this in the face of those stark personal, social, ecclesial and biblical realities. It may be something we particularly need to hear as we go out from here to continue the conversation. It is the shortest but also often the hardest to obey – the often-repeated and very simple biblical challenge – "Fear not!". And if we wonder how we can obey that command or elevate the conversation or understand and share the good news of Jesus with gay and lesbian people and make the lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God visible in society today perhaps we are best to end with the assurance and challenge of John's words in 1 John 4 – "Perfect love casts out fear".