

Gay or Blessed?

The Challenge to the Church of Committed Same-Sex Relationships

Introduction:

The church has never been very comfortable with sex. Over the centuries it has variously: attempted to ignore its existence by promoting celibacy (2nd and 3rd centuries); tolerated it as a necessary but unpleasant part of youth, to be relinquished with the onset of maturity (also 2nd and 3rd centuries); attempted to eradicate it through ascetic and sadomasochistic practices such as self-flagellation, in the Monastic era; spiritualised it, by seeing it as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church (Bernard of Clairvaux); reluctantly accepted it solely for the purposes of procreation (provided it wasn't enjoyed); cautiously celebrated it as a God-given gift to enhance the marriage relationship (Rogers, 1999; Kelsey & Kelsey, 1991; Brown, 1988; Price, 1990). But whatever the particular attitude has been at any one time towards sex in general, several things have been generally condemned: sex outside of marriage, whether this has been promiscuity, adultery or sex between unmarried people; passion and desire, even within marriage – usually termed *concupiscence* and perceived as lust; and eroticism between partners of the same sex. As C.S. Lewis wrote, the church's sole ethic was "either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence" (1955:86)

Once it was all so clear. But in our post-war, post-modern society, the church has had to adjust to changing values and ethics. It wisely no longer comments on passion and desire within marriage. Still uneasy with sex between unmarried people, preferring it not to happen, it finds itself discomfited by couples who choose to live in faithful, committed relationships outside of marriage. It can still hold confidently to adultery as sinful, however, although even here the complexities of relationship-breakdown, divorce and remarriage are confronting its previously straightforward position. It is in the arena of same-sex relationships, however, that the Church is uncertain, divided and, I believe, being deeply challenged. It has no apparent theology for same-sex relationships, and, indeed, seems to have only a frail theology of friendship. Yet it is only from considering the theology of friendship alongside theologies of covenant and commitment that a theology of same-sex commitment can begin to be formulated at all.¹ Changing attitudes in our society

¹ Purely for the purposes of clarity in this essay, the term "gay" will be used as a generic term to indicate same-sex preference, whether male or female. "Lesbian" will be used when referring to specifically female partnerships; "homosexual" when referring to specifically male relationships.

towards homosexuality, together with proposed changes in the law, are generating profound challenges to the Church to re-consider its stand on committed gay relationships – especially those amongst the clergy. A theology of same-sex relationships is urgently needed if the church is to face honestly and sensitively the pastoral challenges which current changes are generating.

History:

For centuries, both Church and society condemned homosexuality and same-sex relationships, and until comparatively recently the homosexual act was illegal. (It is said that the only reason lesbian relationships were not also illegal is because Queen Victoria would not accept that they existed!). Within the last few decades private homosexual acts between consenting adults have been legal in Britain, but while the law has been changed, “homosexuality has been a major preoccupation of almost every Christian denomination in the western world for the past thirty years” (Thatcher & Stuart, 1996:271). Consequently, gay people have felt marginalised within the church, afraid of admitting their sexual orientation, knowing that they would be condemned as sinful if they were to express their sexuality in physical ways.

The terms “homosexual” and “homosexual orientation” belong to modern semantics. Although same-sex relationships have always existed, the concepts of “homosexuality” and “sexual orientation”, were not developed until the nineteenth century, the new discipline of psychology providing both the language and the conceptual framework (Sleight, 2003; House of Bishops, 1991:2.16). What *were* recognised, of course, and accepted to a greater or lesser degree at various points in history, were sexual encounters between same-sex partners – usually men. In the ancient Hellenistic world, they were part of classical culture: it was normal practice amongst the educated for adult males to “mentor” young (pubertal) boys. These relationships, which were certainly sexual, also “carried social and cultural significance and were governed by strict conventions” (House of Bishops, 1991:2.16). In Sparta and Athens, for example, such relationships were seen as an essential part of a boy’s education (Wright, 1987). Their cultural acceptability was based on the inequality that existed in a relationship between a male adult and a youth, for the passive partner was seen as taking on the sexual role of a *woman*. In a culture which valued masculinity for its control, its rationality, its toughness and its strength, anything feminine was regarded as

‘soft’, formless, emotional and uncontrolled, and therefore women were seen as inferior. Slaves, children and women were expected to have the characteristics of effeminacy, while youths were moving from there into masculinity. Thus, if the relationship was between two ‘unequal’ males – between a man and his slave or between an older man and a youth, for instance – sexual activity was culturally acceptable. But because passivity in sexual relationships was associated with the Feminine, being the passive male partner in same-sex activity was demeaning.

So while admiration and attraction between men was culturally acceptable, its sexual expression between equals was despised. This equating of homosexual practice with the feminine applied equally to the Jewish world in the early New Testament period, for in this culture, too, to be a woman was to be an inferior being: “Male homoeroticism is seen by the rabbis as merely the embodiment of the loss of control that turns a man into a woman” (Rogers, 1999:56). The idea that passion (and by implication certain sexual activities) reflected an unmanly loss of control was deeply held by the Stoics, who therefore were critical of anything which suggested femininity amongst men. This attitude found a sympathetic response in the Roman world, where homosexuality found little favour (Wright, 1987). Thus, the condemnation of homoerotic activity in the ancient world was based far more on a patriarchal morality which demeaned women than on practices which were later to be defined as “contrary to nature” (Wright, 1987:42).

In the ancient Near East, male homosexuality between consenting adults was widely practiced and fully accepted for centuries, and in Mesopotamia prayers were offered for divine blessing on such couplings (Wenham, 1987). In Mesopotamia, Assyria and Egypt laws prohibited abuse, so homosexual rape, violence and compulsion, and incest were condemned and punished, but otherwise homosexual activity seems to have been an accepted part of life (*ibid*). As in the later Hellenistic culture, where sexual activity was frequently an integral part of temple worship, male cult prostitutes, whose role was to take the passive role in homoerotic practices were despised as unmanly and effeminate – an interesting anomaly, since the culture attached no censure to those who visited prostitutes and actively promoted temple worship!

Following the lead from Judaism, the Christian church has consistently condemned same-sex practices. Categorising them as being “against nature”, the Church Fathers condemned them more soundly than even heterosexual sins – condemnation indeed in an age when

heterosexuality was viewed with distaste and suspicion, and tolerated only as a necessary evil. Augustine made his views clear:

“Sins against nature, such as those of Sodom, are always and everywhere to be abominated and punished ... the bond of fellowship which ought to exist between us and God is violated when that nature of which he is the Maker is defiled by lust and perversion” (2001, 3.8.15).

As in other cultures, it is again the reversal of male gender roles which causes such offence – a man becomes a woman “against his nature” (Wright, 1987:32). Add to this that male homosexuality was a waste of “precious seed” in an age when the only acceptable reason (to the Church) for *married* couples to engage in intercourse was for procreation, and it is hardly surprising that it was condemned as sinful.

The influence of the early Church’s attitude towards homosexual practice has continued to influence the Christian church ever since, and arguments against the acceptance of same-sex unions in the modern church are based on evidence from the Biblical witness and early church practices. In the debate, it is not often remembered that much of what the Fathers wrote has been re-examined in the light of modern knowledge or simply rejected as superstition and misunderstanding (e.g. Aquinas’ belief that women were failed men, and had less rational capacity (Lloyd, 1984; Morton, 2003). Nor is it emphasised that at this time marriage was viewed very suspiciously by the Church and that marriage ceremonies were considered unsuitable for the church’s blessing until the fourth century. Jerome wrote, “A preacher of continence should not celebrate weddings”! (Price, 1996), an opinion which may well be echoed by many today with slight amendments: “A preacher of moral values should not celebrate same-sex unions”.

With the change in British law which repealed the illegality of homosexual practice between consenting adults in private, and with legislation pending that will give a legal status to same-sex unions, however, the Church is being challenged to re-think its position. Marriage, which at one time in its history was outside its consideration, became a sacrament; now is the time for it to examine its theology about loving, faithful commitment between same-sex partners.

Biblical issues:

Although the Church acknowledges Scripture as one of its sources of inspiration for decision-making, the difficulty is that the Bible is embedded in its culture – which is both

geographically and historically estranged from our own. There are very few “Bible-believing” Christians who would eschew wearing polyester-cotton, only sow one kind of seed in their vegetable patch, abstain from picking the apples off their newly planted apple tree for four years (Lev. 19:19, 25) or refuse – on religious grounds – to eat prawns, octopus or pork (Lev. 11:7, 10). Yet all of these restrictions form part of the “Holiness Code” which also forbids homosexual intercourse (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). There is no doubt that the Holiness Code condemns homosexual practices, even between consenting adults, for Leviticus 20:13 is clear that the penalty is death – a penalty reserved for adultery, incest and bestiality as well (vv.10-16). For consistency, however, either the Holiness Code is followed by the Church in its entirety or it is set aside as no longer relevant under the New Covenant, in which case a different Biblical basis for morality must be sought for today. It is ethically and morally dishonest to “pick and mix” from an entire ethical code which was formulated for an ancient society living in different times and circumstances.

The accounts in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 have both been used as arguments against homosexual practices. They are very similar, which suggests some dependence of one passage on the other (Clifford & Murphy, 2000:23). In both stories there is an attempted homosexual rape of a guest (Judges) or guests (Genesis); in both stories women are offered as substitutes for the male guests, which leaves the reader in no doubt that the desire of each gang of men is for sexual intercourse; both stories recount a violation of the cultural laws of hospitality. It is a condemnation of this last violation which many commentators see as the climax and purpose of the stories, rather than a condemnation of homosexual practice *per se*. “What is surprising and deeply shocking”, writes Wenham, “is their total disregard for the accepted principles of eastern hospitality” (1987: 28) and Whybray (2001:52) notes that the duty of hospitality in the ancient Near East was placed above all other ethical concerns – including sexual ethics. In both passages, and especially in the Judges account, the significance of homosexual rape was its expression of aggressive power and conquest: “It acted out in a literal way the metaphor of conquest in war” (Niditch, 2001:189). Niditch also makes the pertinent point that for ancient Israel, homosexual rape “is as quintessential an expression of anti-social behaviour as cannibalism is in the Greek tradition”. In the *Odyssey*, strangers looking for help are themselves eaten, whereas Israelite strangers are threatened with rape – a display of power intended to shame and demean. The stories in both Genesis and Judges are far more complex than merely

providing supportive evidence for a stance that repudiates faithful, loving same-sex relationships. The report by the House of Bishops supports this:

What ...Christians have too often failed to see is that these stories simply are not relevant to the case, say, of two men or two women who find themselves deeply emotionally attracted to one another, and who wish to live together in a sexual relationship for mutual support in every area of their lives, the situations are too far apart in human terms for any ethical transfer to be made. (2.23)

In the New Testament, it is primarily in Paul's writing that comments about sexual practices are found. Jesus is nowhere reported as making a statement about same-sex relationships, and his only comments about heterosexual relationships are in relation to divorce (Matt.5:31,32; Mk.:10:11,12) and in a list of sins, which also includes evil intentions and slander (Matt.15:19; Mk.7:21). Paul, however, twice condemns those who indulge in same-sex practices, in Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. The writer to Timothy also condemns them as lawless (1:10), presumably following Paul. Wenham, however, points out that the word *porneia* variously translated "sexual immorality" or "fornication" is an umbrella term for all types of sexual intercourse prohibited by Jewish law. He therefore argues from silence that it may also apply to homosexuality:

in the many passages where "sexual immorality" is mentioned in isolation, e.g. "Abstain from sexual immorality" it may well be understood that among the varieties of sexual immorality that the believer is being urged to shun are all homosexual acts (1987:35-6).

Following through this argument, he then maintains that the number of New Testament texts prohibiting homosexual acts is much larger than the few texts usually cited.

The passage in Romans 1 is frequently quoted. Its context is that the wrath of God is against those who, knowing the truth, have suppressed it (v.18), exchanging one reality for another and turning the created order upside down (Hill, 2001:1090). Therefore, "God gave them up to degrading passions" (v.26), which for Paul meant all kinds of sexual immorality and clearly included homosexual acts. Verses 22 and 23 make it clear that Paul is referring to idol worship when he writes of the senselessness and foolishness of those who have not honoured the God they knew through creation. As a faithful Jew steeped in Torah, Paul would have perceived homosexual practices as sinful and corrupt, and would also see all such practices in pagan worship as profoundly offensive. He is using the most powerful language at his disposal to support his argument that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (3:23), for his sample list of "every kind of wickedness" (v.29) includes not only sexual sins but also envy, malice, gossip, deceit and strife. Paul appears not to distinguish too carefully between the wickedness of degrading passions (v.26) and the

wickedness of a debased mind (v.28)! In the context of the first three chapters of Romans, it may be argued that Paul is “setting up his stall” to take the reader to his triumphant climax in chapter three: that against the immorality and wickedness of those who fail to know God and to keep his law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed in Christ. His declaration that all who have sinned are “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:22) is the point of his argument in these chapters. They are most definitely not an argument against faithful, loving same-sex commitment.

The verses in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 are even less convincing than those in Romans 1. Here Paul is writing to the Corinthians about law suits, evidently unhappy that they are using civil courts to settle disputes. His point is that for Christians to take out lawsuits is a loss, even if they win their case, for the mere fact that the dispute has become so serious means that the “winner” really loses. The gains and losses they should be concerned about are to do with eternal, not earthly, things. He is shocked that there are defrauders within the church, for the kingdom of heaven is not inherited by those who wrong and defraud. Passionately, he creates a list of those who are excluded from the kingdom – and reminds them that this is what some of them used to be, before they were saved and sanctified by Jesus. Included in his list are *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, words usually used to denote men who take active and passive roles (respectively) in homosexual relations. There is no reason to doubt Paul’s assertion that some of the Corinthian church members had been cult prostitutes and had actively engaged in homosexual practices, and certainly he would have seen all such practices as contrary to the holy life to which Christian believers were called – but, here again, he is using these as examples to further a different argument: *i.e.* that they were justified and sanctified in the name of Jesus and therefore should not be acting like the unbelievers they once were.

For many Christians these texts are proof that the attitude of Scripture towards homosexual acts is clear and consistent: they are always wrong and attract divine judgement. However, taking texts out of their literary, hermeneutical and cultural contexts to prove a point is not just sloppy reasoning, it is also potentially divisive; and Barton make the relevant point that “a text may have meanings over and above that intended by the original author, meanings which the author was unable to see or ... did not anticipate” (1996:8). On the other hand, for many Christians, the Bible remains the “touchstone and authoritative guide for how men and women are to understand and practise their sexuality and how life ... is to be

conducted” (*ibid*:4). How, then, can the Biblical witness be used to inform a theology of same-sex relationships?

An overview of Scripture shows that faithfulness and commitment to God and to others are held in high regard. The love of David and Jonathan, and the commitment of Ruth to Naomi are upheld in Scripture as pinnacles of human love and loyalty. 1 Samuel 18:1 records that “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul”, and David’s lament for Saul and Jonathan after their deaths describes Jonathan’s love towards him as “wonderful, passing the love of women” (2.Sam. 1:26). Ruth clings to Naomi (Rth.1:14) when she is told to return to her native country to find a husband, and refuses to leave her – in her love and loyalty for Naomi, she is prepared to accept a different culture and religion as her own. While there are some who have speculated about the sexual nature of both these relationships (Calderon²; Dennis, 2005), the Biblical witness makes no comment, choosing instead to focus on their love, loyalty and commitment as metaphors for the covenantal relationship offered by God to his people.

The Gospels intimate that Jesus showed affection and deep love to his close followers, both male and female and was comfortable to receive love and affection in return. John refers to “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (13:23; 21:7); the woman who washed Jesus’ feet was commended and he seems to show neither embarrassment nor annoyance at her actions (Jn.12:1-8); when the rich young ruler comes to ask Jesus how to inherit eternal life, we are told that Jesus, “looking at him, loved him”. While these are not ‘proof texts’, they do indicate that the Bible has a very positive approach to loving, affectionate relationships whether between the same or opposite sexes. Barton argues for allowing the Bible to speak as one book, rather than fracturing or fragmenting it into isolated and opposing parts (1996:7). When this is done, overarching themes of the Bible, such as covenant, love, justice, healing and forgiveness emerge, and life-giving Biblical principles become more significant than deadening, constraining proof-texts.

Doctrinal and theological issues:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave...” (Jn. 3:16). The God of the Christian Church is a God who loves to the uttermost. Any theology of relationship – whether friendship, same-sex or heterosexual – must take into account the passionate, generous, extravagant

² Philip Hermogenes Calderon’s picture, *Ruth and Naomi* strongly implies a sexual element in the portrayal of Ruth and Naomi’s embrace. See appendix.

love with which God loves us, his creation. The writers of the New Testament coined the word *agape* to express this love – a word not in general use at the time. It is used of the love of God towards us, of our love for God and of the divine love for others that the presence of God evokes (Verbrugge, 2000:28). This links *agape* love with concepts like faith, righteousness and grace, “all of which have their point of origin in God alone” (*ibid*). Any theology of same-sex commitment which does not place love at its centre will inevitably fall short of Biblical principles.

One starting point for such a theology is a consideration of one of the meta-narratives of the Bible: *covenant*. God commits himself to his people in love and covenant relationship – faithful, unconditional love and welcome. Regardless of the failures of his people to maintain their part of it, God will never abandon them. In Jesus, the New Covenant is made within the Godhead itself, so that it can never again be broken. Paul uses the marriage relationship as a metaphor for the covenantal relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32), and “a paradigm for God’s relation to humanity” (Wynn, 1990:677). This powerful metaphor holds within it the implication that marriage itself is a covenantal relationship – the couple freely offering themselves to one another in love and faithfulness, for better or for worse, promising to love, honour and cherish one another for the rest of their lives.

A theological understanding of marriage for today, then, is that it is primarily a relationship of covenant – a commitment which is expressed emotionally, practically and sexually. In previous eras, when sex was seen primarily as the means of procreation (and there was no safe means of preventing conception), marriage provided security for women and children and stability for society. The Biblical understanding of marriage as uniting a man and woman into one flesh (*c.f.* Gen.2:24), together with the Pauline paradigm of marriage as a metaphor for Christ and the Church, pointed the way for marriage to be seen as the only covenantal relationship that could exist between people. Consequently the Church has never created a ritual to celebrate friendship, even though the concept of *berith* to denote a covenant between friends is well attested in the Old Testament (*c.f.* David’s covenant with Jonathan in 1.Sam.1:3). Yet a gay relationship between two people who are willing to commit themselves to one another “for better or for worse”, who love one another freely and respectfully, and who intend to remain faithful, are placing themselves into a covenant relationship.

It is not the *sexual* expression of love, *per se*, but the self-giving, extravagant *agape* love which becomes the hallmark of covenant in heterosexual marriage – and which therefore makes it a suitable metaphor for Christ and the Church. This is not to denigrate sexual feelings nor the sexual expression of love in marriage, but to recognise that sexual expression is essentially a physical metaphor for the depth of emotional and spiritual unity and commitment to one another, which is the essence of a loving relationship. Marriage, particularly Christian marriage, is more than bearing children or the establishment of family units to create a stable society; it is a covenant between two people who offer the love of God to each other and who reflect the love of God in their life together. Rogers' (somewhat ecstatic) description of loving sexual expression has relevance here:

(Sex) is for the taking up of human beings by means of their bodies into the life of the One whose life is a perpetual movement of gift. It is for making the other an occasion of joy, as the life of the Trinity takes the Other as an occasion of joy (1999:79)

Viewed from this perspective, committed gay relationships could also be considered “covenantal” which means that, in theory if not in pastoral practice, the idea of “gay marriage” is not an inappropriate model. Further, Rowan Williams argues that

“when we see mutual joy and delight rather than the procreation of children as the purpose of sexual relationships, ... there is no theological justification for restricting such relationships to heterosexual marriage” (cited in Harries *et al*, 2003:112)

Pastoral and Missiological issues:

Although theologically “marriage” may be considered an appropriate model for committed same-sex relationships, pastorally it is likely to be more problematic. For in pastoral practice there are more considerations than just the couple concerned. The Church as an institution and local ministers ‘on the ground’ have within their care not only the gay couples who may want to commit themselves in relationship before God, but also those in the church (and outside) who are not yet reconciled to the Church’s blessing of gay relationships. Great pastoral sensitivity is needed to journey with all parties concerned. It is not only those within the church who look to the Church for leadership and direction; many outside the church, while not professing any allegiance to the Christian faith, are influenced by what the Church says. Some accept its lead, others are critical, but the stand that the Church takes on an issue like gay marriage does not go unnoticed. In the second century, pagans were largely unimpressed by the church’s attitude to sexuality, especially celibacy, and it became a barrier to mission (Brown, 1988:53). While the Church is seeking the will

of God on the matter of blessing gay relationships, it is also important that it recognises the relevance to mission of the ‘gay issue’. Harries *et al* (2003) note that it may sometimes be the Church’s duty to bear conflict and unpopularity for the sake of the truth, but which ‘truth’ is it going to hold? Is it a truth informed by love or doctrine? Many unchurched people of my acquaintance could not understand the problem that occurred over the appointment of Jeffrey John, and saw it only as the Church (yet gain!) being persecutory, more concerned about its doctrines than people. As far as they were concerned, if he could do the job his sexual orientation was irrelevant. And they were critical of what they saw as the Church’s failure to offer support and care to its clergy.

How, then, can the Church – as institution and as local presence – provide pastoral support both to gay couples and to those whose fears prevent them from engaging with the debate? *Issues* (1991) draws attention to the need for congregations to be places of open acceptance and friendship for people of every kind, including gays, but it has to be acknowledged that many gay people, both singles and couples find churches are unsympathetic to them; in some churches they are not welcomed as a valuable members of the congregation, in others they feel so marginalised that they eventually leave. Inevitably those who are marginalised group together for support, and gay clergy are likely to draw a higher than average number of gay people as members of their congregations, simply because gay Christians cannot find the support or counsel they need elsewhere (John, 1997, cited in Harries *et al*:258). Eventually, “gay churches” will spring up – a situation that is likely to create further schism and suspicion amongst so-called ‘straight’ congregations and “a rebuke to the lack of love and friendship in many of the mainline churches towards homosexual people” (Atkinson, 1989, cited in Harries *et al*:265). If this were to happen the Church would be depleted: local churches would lose the richness of insight and sensitivity which many gay people bring, often as a result of their painful journeying, and the Body of Christ would be further divided. The responsibility for accepting those in gay relationships and the responsibility for sensitively educating congregations has to come from clergy and Church leaders. However, they are only able to take their congregations where they are able to go themselves. While clergy are unwilling to engage openly with the theological and pastoral debate and to face their personal anxieties (and prejudices) concerning the gay issue, they will be unable to respond appropriately and sensitively to their congregations.

This is not an easy path for clergy and pastors to walk, for the challenge is to remain faithful to their personal faith, to the church community for which they are responsible, and to the authority of the Church. The House of Bishops' statement that "homophile orientation and its expression in sexual activity do not constitute a parallel and alternative form of human sexuality as complete within the terms of the created order as the heterosexual" make it clear that at present there is little room for equal acceptance of those whose sexuality draws them towards members of their own sex. They continue,

"Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation or with the insights of revelation as the Church engages with these in the light of her pastoral ministry" (1991:40).

Thus, while individual clergy may be willing to bless a same-sex partnership, in much the way that couples can receive a blessing after a civil marriage, the authority of the Church has now aligned itself with a position of non-acceptance of homosexuality as an alternative sexuality. Less than thirty years ago, DSM III, the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual for mental disorder listed homosexuality as a psychiatric illness. With increased knowledge and understanding of homosexuality, it was recognised that it had been an inappropriate diagnosis and was removed from the revised edition. Perhaps at some time in the not-too-distant future, the Church, too, will realise that homosexuality is not a "life-style choice" and that faithful, committed gay relationships are not sinful – and then be humble enough to revise its position.

Rites of passage and models of liturgy:

So what pastoral response would be appropriate towards committed same-sex relationships? It is important that heterosexual clergy do not assume that they know what will meet the needs of gay members of their congregation, for not all gay Christians think alike. Robert Williams (1990), for instance, argues for the inclusion of lesbian and gay committed relationships within the institution of marriage, while Elizabeth Stuart (1996) argues equally passionately that marriage – which she perceives as an "inward, privatised relationship based on concepts of ownership" (p.307) – is not an institution to which lesbians (especially) and gay men should aspire. She offers instead the concept of 'covenanted friendship', supporting her argument with research that reveals that "most lesbians and gay men in stable partnerships do not think of themselves as married but define their relationships in terms of friendship" (p.306). It is essential that clergy who are ministering to gay members of their congregation listen to what their pastoral needs are, and respond in ways that are pastorally appropriate – for them and for the rest of the church

community. It is equally important that the wider Church listens to the range of opinions and needs expressed within the homosexual and lesbian Christian community and engages in dialogue with them, being willing to allow the point of view of gay women and men to inform its own position, and to be humble enough to change that position when necessary to maintain the unity of the body in the bond of peace.

At first sight, Stuart and Williams appear to be diametrically opposed to one another, the latter arguing for gay marriage, the former vehemently opposed to it. However, while not all friendships aspire to marriage, all good marriages are also deep friendships. The concept of covenanted friendship proposed by Stuart is perhaps a good place for the Church to begin to consider its liturgical response to committed relationships – whether the people involved are of the same or opposite sexes. For as things stand at present, there is no liturgical provision within the Church for people to express before God their commitment to one another in friendship. Yet the Biblical witness exemplifies friendship in the relationships of David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi; Jesus is at pains to tell his disciples that they are now his “friends” (Jn.15:14, 15), a significant change of relationship; “No one has greater love than this”, Jesus tells his disciples, “to lay down one’s life for...” ...one’s wife? ...one’s partner? ...one’s children? ...one’s parents? No: for “one’s friends” (Jn.15:13). If the Church could just move beyond seeing “sexual activity of any kind outside marriage ...as sinful, and homosexual practice as especially dishonourable” (*Issues*, 1991:18) there may be a place for creating liturgy that recognises the sacramental aspects of commitment in love and friendship – which may also find expression in sexual activity. This is not to advocate promiscuity, adultery or unfaithfulness, within either hetero- or homo-sexual relationship; but it *is* to recognise that all relationships, straight or gay have the capacity to show the fruit of the Spirit within them, and that to express this in a liturgical form is entirely appropriate.

Conclusion

If, as *Issues* states, any sexual activity outside marriage is sinful, the Church and those in ministry have to ask themselves several searching questions, including what precisely constitutes marriage and what is considered “sexual activity of any kind”(p.18). The Old Testament does not have a theology of marriage: when women were the property of men, previous sexual activity and adultery were prohibited because they despoiled and devalued *property*; and there was no sanction against pre-marital sexual activity with a virgin other

than the expectation to marry her (Deut.22:29). Marriage ceremonies varied across cultures in New Testament times, betrothal (or engagement) normally being as binding as marriage (Matt.1:18). And it was at least four centuries before the Church had a liturgy of marriage and later still before it was doctrinally accepted as a sacrament. So in our own times, when civil marriage can replace church weddings, what precisely is the “marriage” outside of which sex is considered to be sinful? If any two people – gay or straight – have committed themselves to one another faithfully and wholeheartedly, their relationship is a covenantal sharing of lives, hearts, minds *and* bodies – surely this is “marriage” as Christians understand it?

There is an eleventh century office for celebrating a loving commitment of two people of the same sex, known as *adelphopoiesis*, “the making of brothers” (Rogers, 2002:61). It is not certain that a sexual relationship is implied, although Boswell (*ibid*) argues that it is not excluded. However, the fragment of text which remains has at its end a prayer from a wedding liturgy. It is separated from the *adelphopoiesis* by a line, which some scholars have taken to indicate that it belongs to another liturgy entirely, but this raises the question of redaction – why were both put together if they were not used together? Whether there ever was an office for same-sex unions is a matter for speculation, but what this ancient fragment offers is a way of creating a ceremony for celebrating friendship, brotherhood or sisterhood – and perhaps even same-sex committed relationships. It remains to be seen whether the Church will have the courage to explore a similar liturgy for our times.

Afterword

The urgent need for the Church to develop a viable and practical theology of commitment in same-sex relationships is best illustrated for me by the following story: one which deeply saddens me, even as I can rejoice that one young man, at any rate, found peace and fulfilment through being true to himself.

A gifted young priest, he was full of life and energy, dedicated to living out his love for Christ in service to others. For several years he had been celibate, but then he fell in love. His partner, also a committed Christian loved him in a way he had never experienced before – freely, respectfully, wholeheartedly and unconditionally. Understandably they wanted to express their love for one another and proclaim it to the world, but this was not possible; for they were gay, and the Church disapproved of same-sex relationships, especially among its priests, even those which were permanent and committed. Yet this

man had learned about God's unconditional love for him, not through his church but through the loving desire of his partner, and he discovered for himself what Rowan Williams expressed so movingly:

The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God. (2002:310).

After many months of painful heart-searching he decided he had to relinquish the priesthood – at least formally; there was a sense in which he would never cease to be a priest, so clear was his calling to ministry. “When we get to heaven,” he said to me one day, reflecting on his decision to leave the priesthood and re-train as a teacher, “I don't believe God will ask us how well we stuck to the Church's doctrine; I believe God will ask us, ‘How well did you love?’”.

I agree with him.

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