

# SCRIPTURE AND THE THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY: A QUESTION OF DISCERNMENT

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Τοῦ ὅλου τῆ ἐπιθυμίας καὶ διώξει ἔρωσ ὄνομα, *love is the name of the desire and pursuit of the whole.*

Speech of Aristophanes in Plato, *Symposium* §192e

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? *Romans* 14:3-4

Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. *Romans* 14:15

“Do not eat ...” “Do not touch ...” it is the very possibility of a really conscious love, of an ever-growing love that would take man away from an autonomous enjoyment not of one tree, but of all trees, not of one fruit, but of all that is sensible, to consume him, and all the universe with him, in enjoyment of God alone.<sup>1</sup>

A sensual Christian resembles a sea anemone.

In the nobler element, air, it exists as a sluggish unbeautiful excrescence.

In the lower element, water, it grows, blows and thrives.

The food it assimilates is derived not from the height, but from the depth.

It possesses neither eyes nor ears, but a multitude of feelers.

It squats on a tenacious base, gulps all acquisitions into a capacious chasm, and harmonises with the weeds it dwells amongst.

But what will become of it in a world where there shall be no more sea?<sup>2</sup>

To resist ideology, as [Karl] Barth counsels but does not quite succeed in doing in his theological anthropology, is also to resist idolatry; as I argued from [Galatians 3:28], “male-and-female” is a golden calf, and so is a God back-projected from a “male-and-female” model of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

## *Introduction*

What is the challenge for the Church as we address the thorny issue of sexuality and Scripture? The challenge is discerning faithfully, in light of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason, how to account for our complexity as embodied, sexual beings, in a way that offers bread not stone to those who seek healing from the Gospel, without leaving

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (trans. I. and I. Kesarcodi-Watson; Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's University Press, 1978), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (London: SPCK, 1895; 1st ed. 1885), 198 [http://archive.org/details/timefliesreading00ross].

<sup>3</sup> Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (Gender, Theology and Spirituality; London: Equinox Publishing, 2010), 84.

the Church malnourished on a diet of cheap grace. This calls for an approach for which the Anglican Church, despite its current muddles, is peculiarly well-suited: the faithful balancing of apparently incompatible perspectives. But we need to tread carefully, taking account of who we are called to be, as the Church, before God; for our Christian life is not a matter of constructing an unassailable edifice of teaching piece by exegetical piece, but rather a matter of our transformation as a Body, as *the* Body of Christ, into the likeness of the One in whom the image of God is found in perfection. As a Church, we are not individuals accountable to a law, or to *the* Law, but very members incorporate of the mystical Body of Christ, in whom alone is held the unity to which we are called, and in whose gift it is; all else is commentary. That means, of course, that the challenge I have just defined is *secondary* to our fundamental calling as the royal priesthood of God, called out of darkness into His marvellous light. What it does *not* mean is that anything goes, and *that* is where our desperately difficult task of discernment lies.

Rather than give a simple set of answers that we can apply easily to the Church's life, I want to spend some time clarifying exactly what sort of problem we are really dealing with, and how we might go about addressing it. What I have not attempted to do is to resolve neatly every apparent tension between the points I am making. This is both deliberate, and at present difficult to avoid, not least because one key reason the Church's current difficulties exist is because we are confronted with a complex variety conflicting problems and perspectives that go right back to the inconsistencies within Scripture itself.

*The usual problem texts, whose exegesis alone cannot solve our dilemma*

The first point that needs to be made is that this is not a problem that will be solved by more thorough exegesis of the relevant biblical texts. These texts are now well known, and usually include at least the following:

- the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-29, and the very similar story of the rape of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19:1-30; thanks to the influence of the reception history of the Sodom narrative, the former is more familiar, and more frequently adduced in this debate, though its meaning and relevance are still hotly debated
- the prohibitions on a man lying with another man “the lyings-down of a woman” (משכב־אשה) in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, an act which is described as an “abomination” (תועבה)
- the reference Romans 1:18-32 to idol worshippers, whom God has given up to “dishonourable passions” (πάθη ἀτιμίας), which include both men and women giving up “the natural use [of another's body]” (τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν) for that which is “against nature” (παρὰ φύσιν)
- the reference in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 to “soft men” (μαλακοί) and “men who lie with men” (ἀρσενοκοῖται) who, being unrighteous (ἄδικοι), will not inherit the kingdom of God; 1 Timothy 1:10 also refers to ἀρσενοκοῖται, whose lives “oppose the healthful teaching that accords with the good news of the Glory of the blessed God” (τῇ ὑγιαίνουσῃ

διδασκαλία ἀντίκειται κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς δόξης τοῦ μακαρίου θεοῦ).

A number of other texts are sometimes adduced, particularly the creation narratives in Genesis 1-3, which are sometimes taken as showing that only sex between a man and a woman corresponds to what God intends in nature,<sup>4</sup> but these are the main “prooftexts” for opposing non-celibate same-sex relationships in the household of faith.

On the other side, there are a few texts that are occasionally cited in favour of same-sex relationships, though they are at best ambiguous. In the Hebrew Bible, there are David and Jonathan,<sup>5</sup> and Ruth and Naomi,<sup>6</sup> and in the New Testament there is the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple.<sup>7</sup> None of these relationships are explicitly sexual, though they have all been read as such at different times in their history of use and interpretation.

*Why more and better exegesis of these texts will not solve our dilemma*

There are several reasons why exegesis of these texts — of which there has been an awful lot in the last few decades — cannot on its own provide the answers we seek. First, these texts have been made the subject of an ideological battle over what sorts of sexual relationships Scripture permits. So much has now been written and spoken in support of one or another position that it is extremely difficult to come to Scripture afresh and engage with what Scripture *as a whole* has to offer; and by fixating on *these* texts, we may be missing others that could threaten, even subvert, our comfortable certainties (I will be suggesting later that a passionate reading of Romans does exactly this). At worst, this debate has become a *shibboleth* that immediately identifies whether a person is “liberal” or “conservative,” and thus acceptable or not; and so the Church has been reduced to an unholy series of ideological parties (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10). The problem here is not that one party is right and the other wrong, but the very fact that we have tried to operate as if this were the case, staking out territory for a “progressive,” or “orthodox,” or “mainstream” Anglican position. The very attempt to do this is evidence of a kind of partisanship that, however well-intentioned, can only be divisive and spiritually corrosive, and against which Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians has a great deal of wisdom to impart.

This is compounded by a second point, that the way we read Scripture is heavily conditioned not only by where we read from, but by how the biblical texts have been read, interpreted, and used throughout history. Even the questions we ask of Scripture are conditioned by this history of reception. One reason why new readings of Scripture can appear so threatening is because we are conditioned to read in certain ways, and anything that deviates from that can look not simply inherently

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<sup>4</sup> The most thorough case I have yet seen against non-celibate same-sex relationships is Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 18:1-4; 19:1-7; 20:1-21:1; 23:15-18; 2 Samuel 1:19-27. See my extensive treatment in James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* (BibleWorld; Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> See the book of Ruth.

<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, though not indisputably, linked with the author of the Gospel of John, in which alone this disciple appears (unnamed).

unlikely, but actively dangerous. For example, the convention of identifying the sin of Sodom with sex between men has been current in the Western Christian tradition since at least the eleventh century, which means that it is now very difficult indeed to read Genesis 19:1-29 without seeing same-sex relationships as the main focus, even though that has only slight biblical support, at best; equally, whether or not we see David and Jonathan as relevant to modern concerns about same-sex relationships depends a great deal on whether we read 1 & 2 Samuel in light of Levitical prohibitions of man on man sex, or in light of Greek and Roman traditions of male love.

A third point, which I will come back to, is that we struggle to deal adequately with the fact that the biblical texts were written in contexts far removed from ours, in difficult ancient languages that are imperfectly understood,<sup>8</sup> to hearers and readers who are long gone. They were not written for us; we are latecomers. The study of the biblical texts in their ancient contexts — usually called historical criticism — can only close the gap so far. In relation to sexuality, the problem here is largely linguistic: how far do modern, Western terms and concepts for things to do with sex, bodies, and relationships correspond either to ancient Greek, Hebrew, and Latin terms and concepts for things to do with sex, bodies, and relationships, or to modern non-Western terms and concepts for such things? This is a problem in more than one dimension: terms and concepts differ historically from one period to the next, but also cross-culturally, from one culture to the next at the same time. So are there actually such things as “homosexuals” anywhere in the scriptures of Israel and the Church, and if there are, can we actually recognise them? Similarly, I know of neither a biblical nor a modern English equivalent to the Hawaiian word and concept *māhū*. What are we doing, then, when we frame debates about sex in terms and concepts that are more at home in one historical and cultural context than another?

Another, fourth point is not unrelated to this, and that is that we still struggle to acknowledge the way that biblical texts differ from one another. In the case of gender, sexuality, and marriage, we need to take account of why 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 Timothy present such different pictures: in 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, marriage is a remedy for male lust, not a Christian ideal, but by the time we get to the (deutero-Pauline?) Epistle to the Ephesians, marriage between a man and a woman has become elevated to a great mystery, a sign of the love of Christ for the Church (Ephesians 5:32). The most economical answer, accepted by most New Testament scholars, is that despite their common attribution to Saint Paul, they were not all written by the same person, and were written at different times in different contexts, probably in ignorance of other works that were later accepted as authoritative Scripture in the Church. What do we then do with these contradictory texts when we have to read them *as Holy Scripture* in another context again?

A fifth point is related to this: a tendency to read Scripture ahistorically, which the rise of historical criticism has not yet solved in the Church, and may never do.

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<sup>8</sup> Namely, various dialects of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. These are the primary languages, but the Hebrew scriptures were then translated into Aramaic, Greek, Syriac, and Latin, and these ancient translations have held great authority. Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures, plus the Greek New Testament, were themselves translated into Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, and other languages.

We tend to read Scripture as if it is supposed to be clear, transparent, and obviously relevant for us, ignoring the enormously complex series of changes and developments, including the major theological rupture of the advent of the Gospel two millennia ago, that have taken place between the creation of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26), say, and the consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003. We read Scripture as if it is supposed to answer *our* questions, forgetting that our questions may have been unthinkable when our various scriptures were written. Moreover, we sometimes read Scripture as if there should be only one, clear answer for each of our questions, that we can forever after call “clear biblical teaching”: but often there is not, and in trying to claim otherwise we risk turning the richness of Scripture into an ideology rather than an opaque witness to the Word of God.

A sixth point shows why we need to handle one another’s concerns in this debate with delicacy and empathy. Scripture and sexuality together take us to a very vulnerable place before one another and God. Sexuality, if there is such a thing, would seem to be to do with our most intimate feelings, desires, relationships, uncertainties, even terrors. The witness of Scripture, which has a profoundly sacramental dimension, is one of the key ways in which all of us as Christians learn to meet God, to continue meeting God, and to have a light shone into the darkest places of our lives as we grow, bit by painstaking, repentant bit, into the fullness of God’s image in Christ. To question either of these things too deeply can be devastating; it can put both our sanity and our faith in the profoundest jeopardy. We are not dealing here with idle questions whose answers don’t matter, and if we think otherwise when we do exegesis and hermeneutics, we are walking on very thin moral ice.

A seventh point is connected with this. Our vulnerability before God is linked with a desire for the sort of security we think we could have if only we had access to the kind of certainty about ourselves that our embodied complexity makes it impossible for us to get to under our own steam. More simply, we are complex beings, we are mysterious, and this makes us all the more vulnerable and eager for the comfort of someone else’s certainty. So where do we look? We look to Scripture and Tradition, which can seem so much more secure than we ourselves are. What we often don’t fully realise is that the scriptures are *texts*, that need *readers* in order to come to life; and rather than Scripture and Tradition being two separate things, with one growing out of the other, they are intertwined, and together give form to “the faith once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). Scripture itself bears witness to earlier processes of oral and written tradition (without which the scriptures could not themselves exist), and it is the Tradition of the Church that tells us what Scripture is. Most disturbingly of all, not only are we the readers the scriptures require in order to come to life, but we *are part of the tradition of the Church, not separate from it*: we have the terrible spiritual responsibility of handing on (*tradire*) what we first received (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3), and yet Tradition inevitably evolves, and while we trust that somehow the Holy Spirit guides this process, we are grossly deceived if we think that puts the Holy Spirit in any way under our jurisdiction.

The final reason is by far the most fundamental, and cuts to the very heart of the current debate. The main reason why this debate will not be solved by more

thorough and careful exegesis is because that whole approach misses the wood for the trees. Our real business as the Church is to do with the matter of *God*, and that is where I want to start: with the matter of God, and with the goal of the Christian life in light of Him.

*The question of God*

What, then, of God?

In his discussion of dogma at the outset of his introduction to the theology and spirituality of the Orthodox Church, Hilarion Alfeyev makes the following remarks, to which we Anglicans would do well to pay heed:

In our own day there is a widely held view that belief in religious dogmas is not obligatory: even if they still have a certain historical value, they are no longer vital for Christians. Moral and social agendas have become the main preoccupation of many Christian communities, while theological issues are often neglected. This dissociation between dogma and way of life, however, contradicts the very nature of the religious life, which presupposes that faith should always be confirmed by deeds, and vice versa.<sup>9</sup>

This may seem a strange passage to quote in a discussion on Scripture, Theology, and sexuality, but we do need to listen. If we continue to give such a prominent place to a series of moral questions that we have framed in distinctly modern, Western terms, without being called back to the much more fundamental matter of the One before whom we stand, who can never be constrained by the limitations of our language and concepts, by our stumbling questions and desire for clear answers, we will have no hope of regaining the narrow path that leads to eternal life: we will become lost in our questions. It is not clear to me that our most pressing business is to clarify “what Scripture teaches on human sexuality,” or to decide on the “Theology of human sexuality”; these things look important, but they may merely be urgent. They are not first things.

In the preface to his posthumously published work *The Eucharist*, Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann makes the following remarks, which may strike us as terrifyingly unpalatable:

[I]t can be said without exaggeration that we live in a frightening and spiritually dangerous age. It is frightening not just because of hatred, division and bloodshed. It is frightening above all because it is characterized by a mounting rebellion against God and his kingdom. Not God, but man [*sic*] has become the measure of all things. Not faith, but ideology and utopian escapism are determining the spiritual state of the world. At a certain point, western Christianity accepted this point of view: almost at once one or another “theology of liberation” was born. Issues relating to economics, politics and psychology have replaced a Christian vision of the world at the service of God. Theologians, clergy and other professional “religious” run busily around the world defending—from God?—this or that “right,” however perverse, and all this in the name of peace, unity and brotherhood. Yet in fact, the peace,

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<sup>9</sup> Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to the Teaching and Spirituality of the Orthodox Church* (ed. J. Rose; Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011, 1st ed. London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2002), xiii.

unity and brotherhood that they invoke are not the peace, unity and brotherhood that has been brought to us by our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Schmemmann's answer to this ideological nightmare is to return to the Eucharist as the source of renewal. Now there may be much that is troubling, unsettling, and frankly misguided about Schmemmann's comment: after all, there have been, and continue to be, genuine and profound injustices not only in the world but in the Church, and we are dangerously deceived if we think otherwise. Most tragically — perhaps I should say *sinfully* — the chief dangers are when theological language is used as a velvet glove hiding the iron fist of an ideology parading as dogma. In fundamentals, however, I am convinced Schmemmann was right; he has identified a spiritual crisis that tells us exactly why the Anglican Communion cannot, and will not, unless something changes radically, be able to solve its troubles over sexuality. The reason is because we are beginning from the wrong place, when we speaking the things of God we are facing the wrong way,<sup>11</sup> and in the process we are taking Scripture with us into the abyss.

We have, essentially, taken our focus off God, even though we appear to have done this in God's name: all of us, women and men, and everything in between, gay and straight, and everything in between, are trying *in good faith* to wrestle a blessing from God that we can all honour and recognise as such in the Church. The problem is that we are acting as if better scholarship and better Church government will lead to the unity we seek; but it cannot, because such a unity would be an *ideological* unity, imposed from below, reducing Scripture to a body of ideas that we can use to create the God we would like to worship. We have all, “progressive” and “orthodox” alike, taken part in this, and I suggest that the most constructive way forward for the Church is to turn to God, in penitence, faith, and prayer.

*The goal of the Christian life and the mystery of being human*

This does not solve the problem, of course; but it should make us question our focus. We need to re-focus on God, and thus on the goal of the Christian life. The goal of the Christian life is not to formulate conclusively a code of sexual ethics, and to live by it. The goal of the Christian life is to be transformed, through Christ, back into the likeness of God. This is something that most certainly *does* take us a little further in matters of sexuality. Sexuality, if there is such a thing, is an aspect of being human, and in the context of the Church, it can only be in light of what we believe about God that we can address what it might mean to be human.

This takes us to the core of the anthropology of the Fathers of the Church, and to the riches of Genesis 1:26-28. Interestingly, the idea that the creation of human beings as “male” (זָכָר) and “female” (נְקִיבָה) tells us that gender division into male and female is utterly fundamental to our sexual ethics is quite recent; this was

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (trans. P. Kachur; Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 9-10. Some of what I will say later may set Father Schmemmann spinning in his grave, but this Orthodox reality check is nonetheless a salutary place to begin.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking metaphorically here, but perhaps we should give some serious thought to what happens when we do not celebrate the Holy Eucharist *ad orientem*: just whom are we facing when we claim to worship?

not the only, or the key, thing that leapt out at the earliest Christian interpreters of this passage, and that is not its primary significance for a Christian understanding of what it means to be human, though it certainly is a part of it. In the Hebrew Bible, God says “Let us create Humanity (אדם) in our image (צל) according to our likeness (דמות),” and then God creates Humanity in His image (צל) alone (Genesis 1:26-27). This may originally have meant that human beings somehow reflected a *physical* divine figure, but this is not how it was predominantly read, and the ancient Greek translation, which was how the Fathers of the Church encountered Genesis, introduced a further complication, a distinction between creating humanity “according to the image of God” (κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ) and “according to [the] likeness” (καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν). For the ancient Christian interpreters, all this meant that we were created as personal beings, sharing in the spiritual nature of God, and thus we were created free and responsible. In common with the divine nature, humanity is created *intellectual*, but in common with the rest of creation, and in contradistinction to God, humanity is created *sensible*<sup>12</sup> (thus, it seems, “male-and-female” is what we have in common with *animals*, not with God). But by distinguishing between “image” and “likeness,” a distinction was made between the image that “is given to us in full and cannot be lost,” and the likeness that was “given in the beginning only potentially, and man [*sic*] himself was to work on attaining its perfection,”<sup>13</sup> a distinction helped along in Greek by the word ὁμοίωσις, which seemed, perhaps thanks to the influence of Plato, to contain a nuance of *process*, of *becoming* like.

Out of our God-endowed freedom, we are called to respond to God in love, and grow into His likeness, a likeness marred by the Fall but restored in Christ. This response involves not being dominated by our sensible human nature (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:12), but drawn by our deepest impulse for reunion with God (cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1). It is within *this* framework that the division between male and female is significant, because this division is a separation that humans must overcome, either in marriage or in chastity;<sup>14</sup> and it is in Scripture that this framework has its roots, where we are told that the goal of the Christian life is to be changed into the same image [i.e. of the Glory of the Lord] from glory to glory, through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18: τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος). The division between male and female was not, notably, seem as a blueprint for the ideal created order, but something that belongs not to the divine image itself (cf. Galatians 3:28), which will be restored in the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matthew 22:30), but to the lower, irrational, bodily nature that humans share with the rest of creation.<sup>15</sup> It is a provision for human procreation under the Fall, made by God in His foreknowledge

<sup>12</sup> See esp. the beautiful passage in St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Second Oration on Pascha*, 6-7, cited in Seraphim Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man: The Orthodox Christian Vision* (2d ed.; ed. Hieromonk Damascene; Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2011), 197-199.

<sup>13</sup> Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man*, 200, citing St Basil the Great, *On the Origin of Man*, 1:16-17.

<sup>14</sup> What Vladimir Lossky calls “the integrating chastity of marriage” and the “sublimating chastity of monachism” (*Orthodox Theology*, 77).

<sup>15</sup> Thus, at least, St Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16:7-9; 17:4, cited in Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man*, 201-202.



of the Fall, so that the devastation of the Fall might not cut short the multitude of human souls. This is not to suggest that marriage is no more than a necessary evil, but that it is a lesser good than virginity, and thus celibacy, which echo the life of Paradise.<sup>16</sup> Put another way, “male and female” do not reflect God’s ideal, which transcends the very ideas of sex and gender, and gets along perfectly well without them.

Thus, in brief, is the early Christian witness. Genesis 1:26-27 may be more complex than this, however. The fact is that how bodily distinctions between sexes relate to social understandings of what it means to be a particular sex differs from society to society. There is thus a real risk that ideas of manhood and womanhood from other contexts might be imposed on Genesis 1:26-27. More seriously, what happens when the realities of human inclinations, and moreover of human *bodies*, don’t seem to match a strict dualism between two biological sexes? How do physically intersex or psychologically transgender persons fit into this?<sup>17</sup> This is where discernment becomes most difficult: there is a serious danger of procrusteanism if we try to fit people into some interpretation or other of the ancient words of Genesis, when they just might not easily fit; but there is the danger of hubris if we turn round and impose some understanding or other of *ours* onto a text we are bound to take, in some sense, as a witness to the Word of God. I want to suggest here that we need to take account of the sheer mystery of our humanity, a mystery that we are still learning to unpack, that is part and parcel of being created in the image of a God who is the most unfathomable mystery of all. There is a danger here that we need to guard against. The mystery of our humanity is less a cause for complacently revelling in who we think we are now than it is a cause for humility before God and one another, perhaps the deepest reason of all why we are commanded not to pass judgement (Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 14:1-23).

For some reason, we seem to be afraid of the sheer mystery of being human, and tend to cling to the safety of the idea that we are less complex than we really are, sometimes by trying to make out that others are, or should be, less complex. But we will not get far in this debate if we begin with the assumption that our minds and bodies are simple matters, that we can tie others into straitjackets if they look as if they are not going to conform.

As a final word — for the moment — on Genesis 1:26-27, let me note a thought-provoking ambiguity in the Hebrew, that could reflect something of the unfinalisable mystery of who we might be. When the text says “male and female” (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה), there are three things it might mean, all of which are allowed by the Hebrew, but not all of which were necessarily thinkable to an ancient author or reader. First, it may mean that male and female were the two sexes into which God divided humanity, their separation and reunion being necessary for the procreation (Genesis 1:28) that is the object of the first of the 613 commands of the Torah. This is the simplest meaning, given that the Hebrew verb usually rendered “to create” (בָּרָא) has

<sup>16</sup> Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man*, 204-205.

<sup>17</sup> See now Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*.

a sense of *separation*,<sup>18</sup> though it is noteworthy that procreation has not always been understood to refer to *physical* procreation alone, but has also, at times, been taken to refer to *spiritual* procreation, “the increase of the soul,” “the development of knowledge with the aim of perfection.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it is not clear that Genesis 1:26-27 implies a command of any sort about how humans are to relate to one another: it is *indicative*, not in itself *imperative* (i.e. it explains how things were, not how things ought to be under all circumstances),<sup>20</sup> and while Genesis 1:28 gives a clear command to the first differentiated humans, it is not clear how that relates to anyone else (especially in a world groaning under the impact of overpopulation). Second, it may be a hendiadys: God created Humanity male and female, i.e. he created *all humanity*, which would echo the phrase “the heavens and the earth” to refer to the entire universe in Genesis 1:1. Third, it may be a merism: God created Humanity male and female, *and everything in between*. While this may not be the plainest sense of the text when read in its literary and historical contexts, the fact that Hebrew is plastic enough to allow such a sense shows how unstable our language and categories can be.

*The problem with the language of “marriage”*

From the mystery of our humanity before the mystery of God, mysteries that defy any of our forms of thought and language to define conclusively, I would like to turn to something much more prosaic: the recent debates in New Zealand around the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Bill, and around similar legislation in other countries, which have not always made clear enough just how historically contingent our social institutions, and the way we talk and write about them, really are. I turn to this partly because it is the most recent arena in which Church voices have become entangled around issues of sex and relationships, but also because some in the Church see marriage between one man and one woman as grounded from the very beginning in who we humans are before God according to the very order of creation.

The question of marriage is complicated for the Church by the fact that “marriage” as sanctioned by the state, regardless of the role of Christianity itself in shaping the state’s idea of marriage, is *not* primarily a matter of morality, but of rights to which some have the privilege of access, while others do not.<sup>21</sup> The current rhetoric of marriage equality seems, furthermore, to be based on the idea that marriage, sexual orientation, and romantic love are necessarily linked, but that is not obvious. One reason it is not obvious is that marriage in other contexts — and here the Hebrew Bible offers some good examples — has often had more to do with

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ellen van Wolde, “Why the Verb **סָרַב** does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1.1-2.4a,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34 (2009): 3-23.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. St Basil the Great, *On the Origin of Man*, 2:5, cited in Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man*, 205-206.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 106-107, on the problem of taking bodily metaphors as imperative rather than indicative when the metaphors don’t quite fit the realia of human bodies and desires. In any case, why should what is arguably “typical” be regarded as “obligatory” (cf. Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 107), or, more to the point, “natural”?

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Wright Knust puts it like this: “... state-sponsored marriage is not a matter of morality and piety but of privileges meted out to some and denied to others” (*Unprotected Texts: The Bible’s Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* [New York: Harper Collins, 2011], 48).

cementing alliances (generally between men), securing descendants, and controlling property than with the biological sex to which the partners happen to be primarily attracted. This, of course, brings us back to the question of language: in modern English, we may think we know what we are talking about when we use terms like “marriage,” “family,” and “heterosexual,” and that these terms refer to fixed things in the world, even — and this has been very clear in the debates around same-sex unions — things that belong to “nature.” But this is not true: what we call “marriage” and the “family” have evolved throughout history and across cultures,<sup>22</sup> and understandings of both sexual attraction, and gender identities, have likewise evolved across cultures and throughout history. We need a critical awareness that operates in more than one dimension here: we need a deep historical sensitivity to span the gulf between our world and the worlds of Scripture, and we need a deep sensitivity to the differences between modern languages and cultures to span the gulfs between the many different cultures represented within the Church. Otherwise we risk imposing one set of questions and definitions not only anachronistically on Scripture, but on contemporary societies to which they are alien, highlighting the way that the negative effects of European colonialism continue to haunt the life of the Church.

As Anglicans, however, we are bound to engage, from the outset, with the sources of our tradition. This engagement must be faithful, but it should not be uncritical. What, then, do the classical sources of Anglicanism, and behind them the various traditions in Scripture, offer on the question of marriage, and its closest ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman equivalents? What do they offer on questions of sex? I pose these two questions in this way, and in this order, because there are a number of fairly clear traditions about unions between men and women that are the ancestors of our ideas about marriage, and a number of traditions about sex, but they do not always appear together, and they are not framed in relation to ideas about either romantic love or an inherent sexual orientation.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with the Book of Common Prayer, “holy Matrimony” has three purposes: “the procreation of children,<sup>24</sup> to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name”; “for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication, that such persons as have not the gift of continency,<sup>25</sup> might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christs body”;<sup>26</sup> and “for the mutual society,<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family: Ruling Ideologies, Diverse Realities* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 13: “There was no word in the Greek, Roman, or Jewish worlds for what modern Americans take to be the central meaning of ‘family’—namely, the nuclear unit consisting of a married couple, man and woman, and their children, living, usually without kin or non-kin, in a neolocal household. In antiquity it is necessary to distinguish the two different realities of *household*, as a residential unit for production, consumption, and service, and *kin*, as networks of people related by blood and marriage.”

<sup>23</sup> It could, of course, be argued that justifying marriage between a man and a woman on the grounds that marriage is for the procreation of children and is a remedy against sexual incontinence implies an inherent (hetero)sexual orientation, but that would be to impose our categories on older texts, and of course leaves open the question of persons whose orientation is only partially heterosexual.

<sup>24</sup> Perh. cf. Genesis 1:28; 1 Timothy 3:15.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:7.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:1-40. This has vanished from all the marriage liturgies of *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* (Auckland: William Collins, 1989), 777-808, which would seem to represent a huge shift in the way the relationship between marriage, bodily eroticism, and Christian

help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”<sup>28</sup> Underlying this is an understanding that marriage was created by God before the Fall, “instituted of God in the time of mans innocency,”<sup>29</sup> that it is a tangible sign of the love that exists between Christ and the Church, “the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church,”<sup>30</sup> and that the narrative of the marriage at Cana indicates that it was honoured by Christ himself, “which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee.”<sup>31</sup> Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebecca, of all biblical couples, are offered as ancient models.<sup>32</sup> What has happened here is that several — though by no means all — of the many different biblical traditions pertaining to marriage have been made to speak with one voice, implying that “matrimony” is a single thing grounded not simply in human society, but in the divine order of things itself. As we will see, this takes some of these texts out of context and shapes how they will subsequently be read: Genesis 2:24 is no longer an aetiology (i.e. an explanation of why men and women have sex with one another), and marriage in Ephesians 5:22-33 is no longer directly connected with slavery,<sup>33</sup> and other aspects of the household in the ancient Mediterranean world. The historical contingency of the institution of marriage is concealed, as is the fact that several different things are being combined under the umbrella term “matrimony” as if they were all one thing, something that would happen in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the term “homosexuality” (as David Halperin has shown). It is not that the Book of Common Prayer is *wrong*, and it is hardly incoherent; my point is that its presentation of marriage as a single, ahistorical thing risks concealing the plurality of marriage as it — and comparable institutions — have actually existed throughout history and across cultures.

While it is unambiguous in the Book of Common Prayer that matrimony is something that happens between a man and a woman, all three of the elements that make up marriage here could now be predicated of *same-sex* relationships. Although

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piety are understood from what we find in Saint Paul and the Book of Common Prayer (see further below).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Genesis 2:18.

<sup>28</sup> I am citing from “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” in the 1662 edition of the BCP, but these three elements are present in the 1549 and 1559 editions also. See Brian Cummings (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 435 (cf. pp. 64 and 157).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25. Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 440.

<sup>30</sup> Ephesians 5:22-33, which directly connects marriage as a sign of the mystical union of Christ with the Church to Genesis 2:24 (see Ephesians 5:31). Cf. Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 439, 440, 441, where further scriptures are cited: Colossians 3:18-19 (see Colossians 3:22-4:1 on slaves in the household); 1 Peter 3:1-7 (in which Sarah is a model of the submissive wife). We need to think through the significance of Ephesians 5:22-33 very carefully: given that there is a semiotic connection between the bond of man and woman in marriage and the bond of Christ and Church (i.e. the former is a sign pointing to the latter or, perhaps better, the latter is the theological ground for the former), the relationship between marriage and the Eucharist, a sign of the marriage feast of the Lamb, needs urgently to be reconsidered.

<sup>31</sup> Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 434. See John 2:1-11.

<sup>32</sup> Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 437, 439.

<sup>33</sup> Ephesians 6:5-9. In twenty-first century New Zealand, the fair treatment of slaves, and slaves’ obedience to their masters, are no longer considered essential to “family values,” but in Ephesians they most certainly take their place alongside the marriage of free men and women as key elements of household morals.

human same-sex relationships are infertile in themselves, same-sex partners do bring up children as their own, and in the case of female couples, the partners can still bear children through some form of artificial insemination. How quick should we be to scream that this is “unnatural”?<sup>34</sup> Permanent, faithful, stable same-sex relationships can be just as much a remedy against unbridled sexual incontinence as opposite-sex relationships, if the partners are not graced with the “gift” of continency. And “mutual society” is something that can most certainly take place in a same-sex relationship (and does).

All this now raises the question, which has been particularly important for those who have seen definitions of sexual identity as reflecting something that is constructed socially more than it is inherent in a person’s make up, why we regard it as so important to define people in terms of the biological sex of the people they happen to be attracted to. It also raises the question, of whether we can reify “manhood” and “womanhood,” “fatherhood” and “motherhood,” whether children can only be nurtured adequately by a biological man and a biological woman who respectively adhere in every way to the appropriate definition of what it means in a particular society to be a man or a woman; for manhood and womanhood are themselves subject to a very wide range of different, even if overlapping, definitions through history and across cultures. For example, while in New Zealand in the twenty-first century it is very common for a male father to take a very active role in the upbringing of his children, that has not always been the case throughout history, and is not always the case across cultures. This points to shifts in the social definitions of both manhood and fatherhood.

The marriage liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, is, of course, no longer always used around the Anglican Communion, and some of the changes that have been made in the various marriage liturgies reflected more serious shifts in theological position than we might at first realise. For example, in *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, the idea of marriage as a means of preventing fornication for those who do not have the gift of sexual self-control has completely vanished: do we realise what a fundamental shift that represents from Saint Paul and the Book of Common Prayer? The understanding of the relationship between the body and its desires on the one hand, and the life of devotion on the other, has undergone a seismic shift, and our position on this, as reflected in the marriage liturgies of the prayer book, would be unrecognisable to a first-century member of the Church, whose outlook was profoundly shaped by a Platonic dualism between body and soul, and by a deep concern, also shaped by Greek philosophy, with “self-control” (σωφροσύνη). In fact, there is very little that would need to be altered in the New Zealand marriage liturgies — especially the second column of the third form — in order for them to be usable for same-sex couples: if the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* truly holds for these liturgies, what exactly do we believe before God about sex, gender, and marriage?

In light of this last point, the vows of the bride and the bridegroom in the second form of marriage liturgy are noteworthy: they say to each other, “wherever

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<sup>34</sup> Not very quick at all, I suggest.

you go I will go.” This is an allusion not to biblical *marriage*, but to the apparently non-sexual devotion of Ruth to Naomi.<sup>35</sup> Not only is a certain kind of same-sex relationship occluded by the use of Ruth in a liturgy for opposite-sex marriage, but also the fluidity of human relationships is highlighted. The boundary between what we call marriage and what we call friendship is decidedly porous, the classic biblical examples of this being Ruth and Naomi, and David and Jonathan.

Now I am not saying that we can define marriage however we like, nor that the shifts that have taken place in our understanding of marriage entail that persons of the same-sex can be married.<sup>36</sup> What I do wish to say is that *γαμῆ* in the New Testament, “matrimony” in the Book of Common Prayer, and “marriage” in *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* and wider New Zealand society, *do not refer to precisely the same thing*, and that we need to think through very carefully how our understanding of love, sex, gender, and marriage fits into, or perhaps better *ought to be shaped by*, the sources and norms of Theology.

### *Biblical “marriage”*

I turn now to Scripture, but rather than beginning with the creation accounts in Genesis, we need to begin our thinking around sex, marriage, and Scripture with the Gospels, since it is here that we encounter the witness of Jesus, which provides the lens through which the Hebrew scriptures can be read as Christian Scripture. The Gospels are deeply problematic for any attempt to idealise, or even legitimate, sexual relationships *of any kind*. The teaching of Jesus on divorce seems to have been fundamental and deeply conservative, though it is presented differently in the various manuscripts of the three synoptic Gospels, leading to the problem that we cannot know with any degree of certainty what Jesus actually taught on the matter; that raises the question whether our task is to recover the closest approximation we can of the original teaching of Jesus, or whether it is to recognise that we are part of a tradition whose use of the teaching attributed to Jesus was often emended and altered, for whatever reason. In the case of Matthew, Jesus’ teaching on divorce is accompanied by extraordinary teaching on the eunuch, which has been largely forgotten in our current debates, but is perhaps at last worthy of our deepest consideration. The movement around Jesus, and indeed Jesus himself, appear deeply antagonistic to the natural family and household, favouring instead fictive kinship between members of an eschatological group. Marriage is, furthermore, presented by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels as something absent from the kingdom of heaven.

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<sup>35</sup> Ruth 1:16. Cf. the suggested readings, *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, 806.

<sup>36</sup> In point of fact, I am *not* convinced that the marriage legislation should be extended to include same-sex partners, but not because I do not think same-sex partners could be “married”; rather, it seems to me that before such a step is taken, we actually all need to clarify what we think marriage is and why we think thus, and why we suppose marriage is something in which the state should take an interest. I have seen nothing, here or in the UK, to suggest that public debate has clarified such things much, which implies a culpable poverty of serious thought. I am tempted to suggest that the state should get out of the business of marriage altogether, amend the civil unions legislation to remove the existing inequalities that the campaign for marriage equality is seeking to address, and leave the churches to worry about the theological implications of human relationships before God.

*Discipleship* is what is at the centre of the ethical vision of the Synoptic Gospels. So in Luke 14:26-27,<sup>37</sup> Jesus tells a crowd following him that anyone who does not hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, even his own soul, cannot be his disciple.<sup>38</sup> All the Synoptic Gospels include a short narrative in which Jesus identifies his true mother and brothers not with his kin from birth, but with whoever does his Father's will (identified in Matthew's version with his disciples):<sup>39</sup> these fictive kin have, in essence, been adopted into the family in which Jesus is the beloved Son of a heavenly Father, as revealed at his baptism at the River Jordan,<sup>40</sup> and it is this adoption which the disciples are commanded to carry beyond the borders of Israel when they baptise all nations in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20).

In terms of sexual ethics, Jesus is presented as exceptionally strict on the issue of adultery, even excoriating men who entertain the lust that leads to adultery,<sup>41</sup> and in terms of marriage, his teaching also seems to have been extremely strict, though here we come across a difficulty that is much clearer in the critical edition of the Greek New Testament<sup>42</sup> than in any translation: not only do the three Synoptic Gospels not agree with one another, but the various manuscripts of the Synoptic Gospels do not agree either. Furthermore, marriage is in no way an ideal for the follower of Jesus, because the goal of the disciple's life is not family life on earth, but the spiritual life of the kingdom of heaven. Thus when questioned about levirate marriage and the resurrection, Jesus points out that after the resurrection, there is no marriage at all.<sup>43</sup>

### *Divorce*

The teaching of Jesus on marriage focuses on adultery and divorce, and, notably, it is in connection with *divorce* that Jesus cites the creation accounts from Genesis.<sup>44</sup> That is, the creation accounts from Genesis are used by Jesus to justify the permanence of the marriage relationship, not to emphasise its gendered structure of man and woman

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Matthew 10:37-39.

<sup>38</sup> In the rule of life at the end of Justin Lewis-Anthony's otherwise wonderful book *If You See George Herbert in the Road, Kill Him! Radically Rethinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Mowbray, 2009), 220, the priest makes this commitment: "God gave me my vocation to my family before he called me into ordained ministry. My family are the people and the place in which God has given me my wholeness, so I will honour this gift by paying them the appropriate time and attention." While this is something I wish — writing, by the way, as a single man — I could wholeheartedly applaud, it is somewhat in tension with this extraordinarily hard saying in the Gospel, a tension often poignantly explored in the British black comedy *Rev*.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21.

<sup>40</sup> This fictive kinship relationship between the believer and Christ, and its connection with the issue of gendered language for God, has been superbly treated by Janet Martin Soskice in *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). In my view, it is the link between the fictive kinship of the believer with Jesus, and thereby with all the persons of the Trinity, that makes the use of any such language as "Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life" in the context of baptism theologically bankrupt.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 5:27-28.

<sup>42</sup> I.e. Barbara and Kurt Aland et al. (eds.), *Novum Testamentum Graece post Eberhard et Erwin Nestle* (28th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-38.

<sup>44</sup> Mark 10:2-12.

(which is simply assumed). To use Genesis 1-3 as justification for prohibiting sexual relationships between persons of the same sex may thus be to add something to both Genesis and the teaching of Jesus that is not clearly there (which does *not* entail that either the author(s) of Genesis or Jesus would have condoned such relationships — they are simply not imagined in these scriptures).<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, there does seem to be an echo here of an ancient reading of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 that envisaged the creation of “Man” (אָדָם) “male and female” (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה) as the creation of an androgynous first human being, whom God split in two when the first woman was made; the sexual union of a man and a woman, then, is the reunion of the original androgyne. This *could* be used to imply that no such reunion could take place between two men or two women, because it is precisely a man and a woman who make up “one flesh” in the interpretation of Genesis 2:24 attributed in the Synoptic Gospels to Jesus (ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν),<sup>46</sup> the one sexually undifferentiated flesh whose redemption will make sex redundant at the eschaton. This also sheds light on the prohibition on divorce itself: the provision in the Hebrew scriptures for a man to put away his woman (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) is completely overturned by Jesus, so that a man who puts his woman away for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness makes her an adulteress, and a man who marries a woman who has been put away himself commits adultery.<sup>47</sup> There are complications in the manuscript tradition, but the reason for such a prohibition would seem to be that a man whose has been united with more than one woman cannot be reunited with all of them at the eschaton. This might also explain why Jesus appears to have had no sexual partner: a being in whom the separation between male and female has been overcome through the restoration of the divine image would have no need of an opposite sex sexual partner at all.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Genesis 2:24 and the cure for Adam's loneliness*

But there may be more to Genesis 2:24. There are other possibilities, that Jesus does not touch on; the fact that Jesus does not touch on them should make us cautious, because the silence could be read as either approbation or prohibition, or neither! In

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<sup>45</sup> This, in turn, does *not* entail that various kinds of sexual relationship between persons of the same sex were unknown to either Jesus or the authors of the Gospels: it is just that there are no occasions where this is thought worthy of comment. In connection with male and female at creation, there does remain the question of physical complementarity, which may be implied by the allusion to Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians 6:16, but this would actually still require the reader to import ideas about what it takes to describe two persons as becoming “one flesh” from outside Scripture. Why could we not regard the complementarity of two persons at creation as *spiritual* as much as physical?

<sup>46</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 6:16.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew 5:31-32. Contrast Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

<sup>48</sup> This is, surely, why a theology of priesthood that sees the human priest as united to Christ's priesthood cannot with theological coherence limit ordination to one sex — i.e. men — alone. To do that would be inherently to suggest that men are more redeemable, or more redeemed, than women, and that for that reason they are more capable of functioning as a sign of the priesthood of Christ. It would also be to suggest that sex and gender are fixed, given, rather than concepts that match the realities of our desires and bodies only imperfectly. The relevance of this observation for the consecration of women as bishops has recently been explored by Susannah Cornwall in “Intersex and Ontology: A Response to *The Church, Women Bishops and Provision*” (Manchester: Lincoln Theological Institute, 2012), <http://religionandcivilsociety.com/iid-resources/>, accessed January 24, 2013.



the context of Genesis 2:4b-3:24, the second of two creation accounts, the union of man and woman is not presented explicitly as the reunion of the primal androgyne, but rather as the solution to the Man's aloneness. I say aloneness rather than loneliness, because it is not clear whether the problem is that the Man has no helper (עֹזֵר, Genesis 2:18, 20b), i.e., to assist him in doing the gardening in Paradise, or that he is lonely; we are simply told that, in contrast with the refrain in Genesis 1:1-2:4a, "it is not good for the Man to be alone" (לֹא טוֹב הַיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ). The result is curious. Even God — in this narrative, יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים — does not quite know what the answer is to this problem, and God responds to the dilemma by making animals to see if they fit. They don't, so God has to remove a rib from the Man and turn the rib into a woman, thus healing the Man's aloneness.

Hebrew narrative is often written very sparingly, leaving a great deal of room for the reader to engage with the text and play with the gaps. The Eden narrative is one such example, and the openness of the narrative to interpretation suggests that the use made of it by Jesus is, in fact, only one possible use. This openness also implies that to make the text mean only one thing — such as a proof-text for the physical complementarity of male and female, to pick a possibility entirely at random — is to do violence to it. So what do we have here? We have a text that explains where men and women come from, and why they sleep together; subsequently, in Genesis 3:1-24, it explains why people feel shame when they have no clothes on, where clothes came from, why snakes slither along the ground instead of walking on legs, why women suffer such extreme pain in childbirth and such unequal desire for their men (a point I will return to below in connection with the Blessed Virgin Mary), why the ground is so unyielding when men try to till it, and why we cannot walk back into the Garden of Eden. In other words, it is *aetiological*: it is a story that explains the *cause* (αἰτία) of some things, why things are the way they seem to be. It is, therefore, a very problematic source for constructing a code of sexual ethics. It is also not really an account of the Fall: it is only one among many elements that make up the rich and complex source material for the Christian mythology of the Fall, without which very little of our theology of redemption would make any sense.

Like any rich narrative, however, it draws us readers to wrestle not only with the openness of the text, but with what it means to be human. What if we take two elements of the narrative — the Man's aloneness and God's uncertainty — and ask what this might mean for human relationships? The fact that the Man finds completeness in a woman created from his rib actually raises more questions than it answers: what sort of completeness is this — does Eve simply provide him with a physical other, as the reconstructed androgyne theory would imply, or does she cure the ache of his loneliness? How different will relationships look when the humans no longer dwell in the security of Eden? If Eve cures the ache of Adam's loneliness, is it the fact of her womanhood that makes it possible for her to cure his loneliness, or simply the fact that she shares his humanity? If the latter, how do the physical and spiritual aspects of their union relate to each other? What is there to say here that, of the rest of humanity yet to come, some may not have their physical and spiritual yearnings met by persons of their own sex, or that for some, spiritual unions without

physical sex meet precisely that need? Certainly in the framework of Jewish Scripture, the Torah provides an antidote to “the evil inclination” (יצר הרע) in such a way that *certain kinds of sex* are out of bounds by divine decree, but in a Christian context, when the Law is no longer there to set the bounds, why could it not be that physical and spiritual unions between persons of the same sex exhibit a cure for loneliness just as lovely as that which, in the Eden narrative, Adam and Eve shared?

There is a passage from Plato’s *Symposium* that sheds perhaps unexpected light on this. It is, of course, way beyond the canon of Scripture, but the Christian tradition has always had an exceptionally complex relationship with the Greek and Latin traditions, through the context of which the Gospel emerged. This is true above all of Plato. In the case of the *Symposium*, we have to read with extra care, partly because of its complex reception history, and partly because it is filled with irony, subtlety, and humour, and it is not clear whose voice carries the day in the dialogue, nor how we are supposed to read it. It is a dialogue about love (ἔρως).<sup>49</sup> One of the men at the drinking party, Aristophanes, has a rather unusual take on love.<sup>50</sup>

“The starting-point is for you to understand human nature (τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν) and what has happened to it. You see, our nature (φύσις) wasn’t originally the same as it is now: it has changed. Firstly, there used to be three human genders (γένη), not just two — male and female — as there are nowadays. There was also a third, which was a combination of both the other two. Its name has survived, but the gender itself has died out. In those days, there was a distinct type of androgynous person (ἀνδρόγυνος), not just the word, though like the word the gender too combined male and female; nowadays, however, only the word remains, and that counts as an insult.

“Secondly, each person’s shape was complete: they were round, with their backs and sides forming a circle. They had four hands and the same number of legs, and two absolutely identical faces on a cylindrical neck. They had a single head for their two faces (which were on opposite sides), four ears, two sets of genitals, and every other part of their bodies was how you’d imagine it on the basis of what I’ve said. They moved around in an upright position, as we do today, in either of their two forward directions; and when it came to running, they supported themselves on all eight of their limbs and moved rapidly round and round, just like when acrobats perform that circular manoeuvre where they stick their legs out straight and wheel over and over” (*Symp.* 189e-190a).

“Now, their strength and power were terrifying, and they were also highly ambitious. They even had a go at the gods. Homer’s story about how Ephialtes and Otus tried to mount

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<sup>49</sup> This word is absent from the New Testament, which, as is well known, favours ἀγάπη; what is not at all clear is how far firm distinctions can be made between the senses of the different words for “love” in ancient Greek, and we need to be careful of imagining that there is ever a precise correspondence between a word and the idea we think it represents. A recent exploration of love in the Christian tradition that does not buy into a sharp distinction between ἔρως and ἀγάπη is L. William Countryman, *Love Human and Divine: Reflections on Love, Sexuality, and Friendship* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Plato, *Symp.* §§189a-193e. I have used the translation by Robin Waterfield, *Plato: Symposium* (Oxford World’s Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), checked against the Greek text in Kenneth J. Dover (ed.), *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Graham Ward alludes to the speech of Aristophanes *en passant* in “The Erotics of Redemption — After Karl Barth,” *Theology & Sexuality* 8 (1998): 52-72 (70).

up to heaven to attack the gods is really about them.<sup>51</sup> So Zeus and the rest of the gods met in council to try to decide what to do with them. They were in a quandary: they didn't see how they could kill them and blast them out of existence as they had the giants,<sup>52</sup> because that would also do away with the veneration and sacrificial offerings the human race gave them; but they also didn't see how they could let them get away with their outrageous behaviour. After thinking long and hard about it, Zeus said, 'I think I can see a way for the human race to exist, but to be weakened enough to start behaving with some moderation. What I'm going to do is split every single one of them into two halves; then they'll be weaker, and at the same time there'll be more in it for us because there'll be more of them. They'll walk about upright on two legs. If in our opinion they continue to behave outrageously,' Zeus added, 'and they refuse to settle down, I'll cut them in half again, and then they'll go hopping around on one leg.'

“With these words, he cut every member of the human race in half, just as people cut sorb-apples in half when they're going to preserve them, or cut an egg in two with a hair. Then he told Apollo to twist every divided person's face and half-neck around towards the gash, the idea being that the sight of their own wounds would make people behave more moderately in the future. He also told Apollo generally to heal their wounds. So Apollo twisted their heads around, and pulled the skin together from all over their bodies on to what is now called the stomach (think of purses being closed by draw-strings), leaving only a single opening in the middle of the stomach, which we call the navel, where he tied the skin up into a knot. Then he smoothed out most of the wrinkles and fashioned the chest with the help of a tool like the one shoe-makers use to iron out the wrinkles in leather they've got on a last; he left a few wrinkles, however, the ones in the region of the stomach and the navel, to act as a reminder of what happened all that time ago.

“It was their very essence that had been split in two, so each half missed its other half and tried to be with it; they threw their arms around each other in an embrace and longed to be grafted together (ἐπιθυμοῦντες συμφύναι). As a result, because they refused to do anything without their other halves, they died of starvation and general apathy. If one of a pair died while the other half was left alive, the survivor went in search of another survivor to embrace, and it didn't matter to it whether the half that it fell in with was half of what had originally been a female whole (it is the half, not the whole, that we nowadays call female, of course) or of a male whole.

“Under these circumstance, they were beginning to die out. Zeus took pity (ἐλεήσας) on them, however, and came up with another ingenious idea: he changed the position of their genitals round to their fronts. Up until then, their genitals too had been on the far side of their bodies, and procreation and birth hadn't involved intercourse with one another, but with the ground, like cicadas. So Zeus moved their genitals round to the front of their bodies and thus introduced intercourse between two human beings, with the man as the agent of generation taking place within the woman.<sup>53</sup> His reasons for doing this were to ensure that, when couples embraced, as well as male-female relationships leading to procreation and offspring, male-male relationships would at least involve sexual satisfaction (πλησμονή ... τῆς συνουσίας), so that people would relax, get on with their work and take care of other aspects of life.

“So that's how, all that time ago, our innate sexual drive (ὁ ἔρως ἔμφυτος) arose. Love draws our original nature (φύσις) back together; he tries to reintegrate us and heal the split in

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Genesis 11:1-9.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Genesis 6:1-4; Numbers 13:33; *1 Enoch* 6-16.

<sup>53</sup> I.e., only male sperm enables generation. There is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible that the biblical authors thought differently, or that they shared our understanding of the way men and women together contribute to human generation. In the Hebrew Bible, there are a number of type-scenes where a woman has no children (e.g. Sarai/Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah), and the LORD opens her womb; and part of the concern with levirate marriage is based on the fact that it is *men* who must take responsibility for raising up seed for the male line. Beyond this, however, exactly what ancient Israelites really thought about the mechanics of generation is unclear.

our nature (ἰάσασθαι τὴν φύσιν τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην). Turbot-like, each of us has been cut in half, and so we are human tallies, constantly searching for our counterparts. Any men who are offcuts from the combined gender — the androgynous one, to use its former name — are attracted to women, and therefore most adulterers (πολλοὶ τῶν μοιχῶν) come from this group; the equivalent women are attracted to men and tend to become adulteresses. Any women who are offcuts from the female gender aren't particularly interested in men; they incline more towards women, and therefore female homosexuals (ἑταιρίστριαι) come from this group. And any men who are offcuts from the male gender go for males. While they're boys, because they were sliced from the male gender, they fall in love with men, they enjoy sex with men and they like to be embraced by men. These boys are the ones who are outstanding in their childhood and youth, because they're inherently more manly (ἀνδρειότατοι ὄντες φύσει) than others.<sup>54</sup> I know they sometimes get called immoral (ἀναίσχυντος), but that's wrong: their actions aren't prompted by immorality, but by courage (θάρρος), manliness (ἀνδρεία), and masculinity (ἀρρενωπία). They incline towards their own characteristics in others. There's good evidence for their quality: as adults, they're the only men who end up in government" (*Symp.* 190b-192a).

It is not simply sex the sundered partners are after, but the one who is their other in every respect. For those attracted to their own sex,<sup>55</sup> the only reason they get married (to women) is because convention (νόμος) and the societal need for procreation (παιδοποιία) override their natural inclinations (τὸν νοῦν φύσει). Opposite-sex marriage, here, has nothing *necessarily* to do with one's natural inclinations, but with societal convention.

Aristophanes' speech is eventually critiqued by the one woman who (after a fashion) speaks, Diotima.<sup>56</sup> But in spite of this, and in spite of its folkloric character — which it shares, of course, with Genesis 2:4b-3:24 — it may strike a chord. In love, we are seeking our other half, and the shape of that seeking is frequently not something we could have anticipated before love struck us down.<sup>57</sup> The sexual drive,

<sup>54</sup> Note that for Aristophanes (according to Plato), same-sex attraction is consonant with *manliness*, not effeminacy. The modern idea represented by the English word "homosexual" has come to incorporate the idea of effeminacy in a way that does not reflect anything inherent to male homosexual attraction as such, but is shaped by all sorts of ideas that combined towards the end of the nineteenth century, at least in England (see David M. Halperin's important book *How to do the History of Homosexuality* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002], and Linda Dowling's earlier work *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994], and my recent book *The Love of David and Jonathan*, which is dependent on both Dowling and Halperin, *inter multa alia*). Within the gay community — whatever that is — there are all sorts of performances of what it means to be a man attracted to other men (what might be called the "butch to femme" scale). Just what assumptions do we have about sex and gender that have nothing to do with the realities of people's lives?

<sup>55</sup> Here (*Symp.* 192b), Aristophanes is not discussing the love of two men who are in every respect equals, but the Athenian phenomenon of παιδεραστία, the love of an older man for a younger, which in the *Symposium* is represented by the love of Socrates for Alcibiades. This is *not* what we term paedophilia, and in fact there is no clear correspondence in the language we use to describe our society to what the Athenians called παιδεραστία. For the multifarious permutations of Greek love, see James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> See Plato, *Symp.* §§201d-212c, where Diotima's words are transmitted in a speech by Socrates. For Diotima, the search for one's other half is not love unless that other half, or the whole, happens to be good. The basic drive here is the search for the good.

<sup>57</sup> Here the Old Latin translation of 2 Samuel 1:26, probably based on a misconstrual of the Hebrew in the Greek translation that lies behind the Old Latin (cf. the quote in Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Quaestiones in Librum II Regnorum* 7 [Patrologia Graeca 80:599-602]), is worthy of note. David sings to the dead

furthermore, is directed towards the fulfilment of a genuine need, and we experience it as innate, regardless of what forces have helped to shape it. It can bring healing. I cite Aristophanes here not because I think his speech should be given authority alongside Scripture, but for two reasons: it shows how differently it was possible to think about how our loves and desires correspond to our bodies and to nature, which should make us pause before we read too much of our own assumptions into Genesis 1-3, and it highlights aspects of what love might be that Scripture does not (with the possible exception of David and Jonathan, especially in 1 Samuel 18:1-4 and 2 Samuel 1:26, where their love seems to have been a stronger bond than that between a man and a woman).<sup>58</sup>

Yet we need to be a little cautious here. For Aristophanes, reuniting with our other half is a recovery of our original nature (τὴν ἀρχαίαν ... φύσιν, *Symp.* 193c), which Diotima, via Socrates, suggests is not love unless it comes from the quest for union with an other half that is good. But for the Christian, the recovery of our original nature is our redemptive transformation into the likeness of Christ, which, notably, has often been imagined in the Christian tradition as a union of lovers. What is still unclear is whether *within* that christological framework, two persons of the same sex can rediscover their other *human* half, in and through whom is found the good, in a way that does not exclude bodily intimacy.

#### *Fallenness, Sexual domination, and the Immaculate Conception*

There is one further aspect of the connection of the Eden narrative with the Fall that needs attention. It is sometimes claimed, not least by Joseph Ratzinger (now His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI), that homosexual desire is a product of the Fall. This, however, is without biblical foundation, and can only be asserted by extrapolation: we know (somehow) that homosexual desire is wrong,<sup>59</sup> we also know (from our Tradition) that humanity went wrong as a result of the Fall, therefore homosexual desire must be a result of the Fall. Now, to be sure, there *surely are* sexual desires that are unhealthy, because they lead, directly or indirectly, to the harm of others; the sexual abuse of minors would seem to be a clear example of this, and the failure of too many in the Roman Catholic hierarchy in particular to make an unambiguous *moral* distinction between homosexual acts between consenting adults and paedophilic abuse (i.e., they are both sinful) is profoundly disturbing.<sup>60</sup> It is not clear to me that homosexual relationships “are intrinsically disordered and in no case can be approved of”;<sup>61</sup> what is difficult here is recognising that a shift is possible in moral

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Jonathan, *ceciderat amor tuus in me sicut amor mulierum*, “your love fell on me, just like the love of women” (quoted in St Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis ministrorum* 3.61).

<sup>58</sup> On the manifold ambiguities and complexities in these texts, see my *The Love of David and Jonathan*, esp. ch. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Romans 1:18-32 could be cited in support, but this raises other problems (see below).

<sup>60</sup> In fact, morally bankrupt. In light of my comments in the previous section, we touch here on a desperately difficult issue of discernment. How can we give bread not stone not only to those who are the victims of egregious sexual abuse (which the Church is morally obligated to do), but to those whose *apparently innate sexual drive* has pushed them to commit that abuse in the first place?

<sup>61</sup> *Persona humana* §8; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2357.

teaching *at this point*, but not with respect to outcomes of other kinds of innate sexual drive. Why?

Well, the Eden narrative *does* address the issue of sexual desire directly, though in such a way as to suggest what might at first look like an unlikely possibility. In Genesis 3:16, God curses the woman by telling her that her desire will be for her man, and he will rule over her (אל אישך תשוקתך והוא ימשל בך). In the previous verse, the snake had been cursed by God when he was told that the woman's seed would bruise his head and he would bruise his heel (הוא ישופך ראש ואתה תשופנו עקב), a passage that has long been taken — at least in the Western Christian tradition, but not exclusively there<sup>62</sup> — to refer to the conquest of Satan through the obedience of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the redemptive work of her Son. In a hymn in honour of the Immaculate Conception — the belief that by a special divine grace Mary, at her conception, was preserved from the stain of original sin — Frederick William Faber seems to tie these two verses together:

*He gazed on thy soul it was spotless and fair;  
for the empire of sin it had never been there;  
None had ever owned thee, dear Mother, but He;  
And He bless'd thy clear shining, Sweet Star of the Sea.*

That is, in the obedience of Mary Immaculate to God's will, the power disparity characteristic of human partnerships under the Fall is dissolved: God alone has “owned” Mary. The mark of fallen human relationships is the desire of a woman for her man, not the desire of same-sex partners for one another, raising the question of whether it is the *equality* of the partners that is the true mark of redeemed sexual relationships, not the biological sex of the partners as such.

#### *Eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven*

Perhaps the hardest verse for the modern Western reader — though not necessarily for anyone reading the Gospels in a less, or differently, sexualised culture — is Matthew 19:12, in which Jesus lists three categories of “eunuch” (εὐνούχος):

- there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mothers' womb (εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνούχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως)
- there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by people (εἰσὶν εὐνούχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων)
- and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of the heavens (εἰσὶν εὐνούχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν)

Jesus presents this saying — impeccably attested in the manuscript tradition of Matthew — to his disciples in response to their remark that, if men were to be forced

<sup>62</sup> Seraphim Rose cites the nineteenth century Russian work of Bishop Vissarion, *Толкование на паремий* (vol. 1; St Petersburg: I. L. Tuzov, 1894), 55-56 [*non vidī*], in *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man*, 266-267, but traces the origins of this teaching to St Irenaeus of Lyons and St Epiphanius of Salamis. Cf. Revelation 12:17.

to live under his onerous prohibitions against divorce, it would be better for them not to marry. The implication is, particularly in light of the third category of eunuch, that there is nothing in the teaching of Jesus, as preserved (however imperfectly) in the Gospels, to suggest that it is a Christian ideal for a man and a woman to marry.

In light of the Gospels, then, the primary question should not be about the acceptability or otherwise of sexual relationships between persons of the same sex. Rather, we should probably be asking whether the Anglican Church's position on divorce — which on any reading of the manuscript tradition of the Gospels is significantly at odds with that of Jesus — is now unacceptably lax, indeed theologically incoherent. There are, of course, good reasons why the Church has moved on this issue, but with what results, theologically? We should also, moreover, be asking whether the real reason why our Church is so confused over sexuality is not because we have caved in to a range of worldly pressures to celebrate our bodyliness outside marriage, and not because shameless perverts are demanding rights that are self-evidently abhorrent to anyone who truly grasps the way natural order has been set up by God, but *because we have made opposite-sex marriage, rather than celibacy for the sake of the kingdom, the summit of the Christian moral life*. What would our Church look like if we truly put the reality of the kingdom first?

It seems quite clear that Jesus, and the Gospels that bear witness to Him, present sexual ethics in light of, but with distinct and unusually strict interpretations of, the sexual ethics of the Hebrew scriptures; yet this, again, is to present the evidence in light of *our* questions. In fact, marriage, sexual relationships, and the procreation of children are not the key issues of the Gospel, and the Gospels certainly cannot be used faithfully to support the idea that monogamous, heterosexual marriage leading to the procreation and nurture of children is a Christian ideal (non-celibate same-sex relationships are entirely absent from the Gospels, which tell us nothing directly about how they should be evaluated). This lack of concern with marriage and procreation may, incidentally, be connected with the fact that the New Testament, as a product of members of an essentially Jewish group heavily influenced by the impact of Hellenism in the Levant, differs strongly from the Hebrew Bible on the significance of securing descendants. In the Hebrew Bible, there is no clear and consistent belief in an afterlife, though by the time of very late books such as Daniel (ca. 165 BCE), there was a fledgling belief in a resurrection of those who had not received their just deserts in this life (Daniel 12:2). In earlier works, it was essentially to make sure the seed of Israel was protected: it must not be contaminated by foreign seed, the seed of a dead Israelite man who died without issue had to be preserved by his next youngest brother having procreative sex with his late wife, and so on. In this sort of context, the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28) makes good sense. But in the context of the Gospels, where the imminence of God's cosmic judgement dictates ethics, marriage and procreation cannot be regarded as a priority: discipleship shaped by the kingdom of heaven, on the other hand, is most definitely a priority.

So we *must* ask whether putting issues of sex and marriage at the centre of the Church's agenda is, in fact, a gross, and spiritually corrosive, distraction. We should

rather begin with the question *what does it mean to be a disciple?* Just what is the cost of discipleship for us in the Church, and are we really able to shoulder our cross?

#### *The Beloved Disciple*

The Gospel of John is radical in a different way. In this Gospel, there is no teaching on marriage as such, though the first of the “signs” of Jesus takes place at a marriage in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11), which as we have seen is part of the scriptural framework for marriage in the Book of Common Prayer. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John presents Jesus as being in a deep relationship with one of his disciples in particular, known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” The nature of this relationship is most unclear, as is the precise identity of the disciple in question, but it does at least bring us back to the most basic relationship of the Christian life, which is not heterosexual marriage but a relationship of devoted discipleship to Jesus.

#### *Sex in the Hebrew scriptures*

When we turn to the explicit sexual codes of the Hebrew scriptures, we are confronted, as twenty-first century Christians, with several problems. First, there is not one single law code in the Hebrew Bible, but there are several, which have been edited together. At certain points they do not speak with one voice. Second, we have a tendency to approach these laws selectively and with our questions, which means that some laws appear relevant to us and others do not, and that we can sometimes impose our context on the ancient historical and literary context(s) of the biblical laws. Third, it is not actually clear how far *any* of the biblical laws — at least with the apparent exception of Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18, 34 — apply to modern Christians. This is perhaps the sharpest problem, and goes back to the ancient theological conundrum of how to take a Gospel that emerged in the context of a Torah-centred Palestinian Judaism to Gentiles who had no such framework within which to interpret it, and then how to make ethical decisions in churches that contained both Jews and Gentiles. Our current dilemmas show us that, in fact, despite the best efforts of the first and second generations of Christians, this conundrum has never been resolved; the Church has never decisively figured out how to deal with the relationship between Law and Gospel.

#### *Leviticus 18:22; 20:13: “the lying down of a woman”*

The two commandments usually wheeled out in opposition to same-sex relationships are Leviticus 18:22; 20:13. But we need to ask what sort of ideas enabled these commandments to make sense. They depend chiefly on a theology of holiness, assumptions about manhood and womanhood, and, in their final, redacted, form, on an ethnic distinction between Israelites on the one hand, and Egyptians and Canaanites on the other. As is now well known, there has been an unhelpful tendency to go cherry picking in the laws of Leviticus for passages that support anti-homosexual readings of Scripture, without a corresponding interest in whether we can eat pigs or shellfish. This is not only inconsistent, but implies that *the entire Christian Bible* is to be taken, without discrimination, as the source for our code of sexual ethics, without acknowledging either that the New Testament does not



unambiguously support such a view, or that a select group of passages is being made to stand synecdochically — and thus misleadingly — for the entire witness of Scripture. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, because they seem to belong to just one of the law codes of the Hebrew Bible — there are no such prohibitions in Exodus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy,<sup>63</sup> and no comparable references to man on man sex in the Hebrew Bible outside the context of the gang rape of an outsider (Genesis 19:1-29; Judges 19:1-30).

There are three points to be made about Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, before I move on to read them in light of Galatians 3:28. First, both verses depend not on some sort of prohibition on the wastage of seed, or the mixing of semen and excrement; these concerns may hover somewhere in the background, but they are not the explicit reason given for the prohibition, which is that it is, *for some reason*, an abhorrence to Israel's God, a תועבה. Second, what is it that is an abhorrence? It is a male lying with a male “the lyings-down of a woman” (משכבי אשה). It is *a transgression of gender boundaries*, which means that in order for this commandment to make sense, there has to be a corresponding understanding of what it took, in the world behind the text, to be a woman. Without this, the text doesn't make sense. Presumably this means one man allowing another to penetrate him anally,<sup>64</sup> with the connotations of disparities of power that implies (that is, the disparity of power that existed between a man and a woman in ancient Israel has been transferred to a certain kind of sexual act between two men). One man is allowing another to treat him as his sexual property, and is becoming unmanned in the process (whether oral sex and mutual masturbation between men were considered a problem for anything but ritual purity is not specified, for some reason — perhaps such things didn't occur to the priests who compiled the Holiness Code). It may also be that a woman — and of course only particular women, given that some are out of bounds — was understood to be inherently the only sort of person that could receive semen.<sup>65</sup> Third, in the case of Leviticus 18:22, the prohibition is framed as part of a call for Israel not to act as Egyptians and Canaanites act: in other words, it is a call *not to transgress ethnic boundaries*. Without this, the text doesn't make sense. We are dealing here with the way the language of the human body, in one particular ancient context, is coded for gender, race, and power; it is most unclear what we are supposed to do with this when the language of the human body in some other context is coded differently.

So what happens, then, when we receive the Gospel in a context in which the socially constructed boundaries between ethnicities and genders have been explicitly overcome in Christ? It is true that, according to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15:6-

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Knust, *Unprotected Texts*, 147-148.

<sup>64</sup> This is the interpretation favoured by Saul Olyan. See Olyan, “‘And with a male you shall not lie the lying down of a woman’: On the meaning and significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.1 (1994): 179-206.

<sup>65</sup> It is here that the archaeology of the prohibition becomes interesting, even though it is hidden by the text. Knust, *Unprotected Texts*, 146-147, argues that the laws that prohibit sex with a particular person, at particular times, or in particular ways are based on the idea that Israelite semen should not be shed inappropriately (the Hebrew Bible also looks disparagingly on *coitus interruptus* where the male partner is duty bound to provide children for his dead older brother — see Genesis 38:8-10 — but is silent on the question of masturbation).

29), when confronted with the question of whether Gentiles could be saved without first being circumcised, a council was called at which it was decided that Gentile converts had to abide by a reduced number of commandments: they were to abstain from “the pollutions of idols” (τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων), from sexual immorality (τῆς πορνείας), from the meat of strangled animals (τοῦ πνίκτου), and from blood (τοῦ αἵματος). What is unclear is whether sexual immorality (πορνεία) corresponds to the code in Leviticus 18:6-23, which includes the prohibition of sex between men, and whether Christians are still bound by the decision of the council of Jerusalem today (not only in the matter of sex but also in the matter of how our animals are slaughtered for food), or whether this decision was temporary and pragmatic in the context of a mission affecting the interaction between Jews and Gentiles, where to throw over the *entire* Torah in one go would have created an unacceptable stumbling block to both groups living in light of the Gospel. After all, the problem of meat that has been offered to foreign gods (εἰδωλόθυτος) would only have arisen at the interface between Jews and Pagans in the ancient Mediterranean, and is not a pressing issue in, for example, twenty-first century Dunedin, suggesting that if we focus today on the *sexual* prohibition, which is just as much a question of ethnic boundaries as meat offered to foreign gods, we are being guided not by the text alone, but by our odd fixation on what other people do with their bodies. This question arises again in Romans, in a passage I will discuss below.

When we come to Galatians 3:28 we face a different issue. Here, the question of the status of the Law among Gentiles, and the relationship between Jew and Gentile converts, provides the context for Saint Paul to claim, famously, that through baptism, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus (οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλληνας, οὐκ ἔνι δούλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ· πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἷς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ). There are two things to note here, which may at first sight appear to be in tension. First of all, the identity of the Christian is only, and entirely, found in unity with Jesus Christ in Baptism. Identity politics,<sup>67</sup> of any sort, that places some aspect

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<sup>66</sup> Note here that it is not “male *or* female” but “male *and* female” that will be erased. This chimes well with the reading of Genesis 1:26-27 by St Gregory of Nyssa, cited above, in which the division into “male and female” reflects God’s foreknowledge of a Fall, whereby God makes provision for the ongoing procreation of human souls in a fallen world. It may well be, then, that far from a clear distinction between male and female — both in bodies and in language, in ideology — being an ideal, grounded in the created order and the ultimate divine will for humanity, such a distinction is provisional, catering for, and in the end reflecting, our fallen state, open to being overlaid again and again by the fragments of our ideologies of gender and what is “normal.” Rather, “it may be that clear sex-gender differentiation, rather than ambiguity, is what will be erased in the new humanity” (Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 70). If so, why could it not be that, given the fallenness of *all* human relationships, our goal is to make of them the very best we can, regardless of the biological sex of the partners? Here my comments above on redeemed relationships are again apposite: since Galatian 3:28 signals the end of a distinction that opens the way to the power differential inherent in (hetero)patriarchal marriage, could it not be that the characteristic of redeemed relationships is that, regardless of the biological sexes of the partners, they reflect the absence of such a power differential, and all the abuse that can go with it?

<sup>67</sup> There are manifold dangers in this claim, and I want to be clear about what I do not mean. To take pride in one’s status as a gay or lesbian person in the Church or in wider society is *not* necessarily to put that between oneself and Christ. Such pride is not necessarily arrogance, or self-importance, or hubris, or an obsession with sex. Why not? Because its purpose could well be to unsettle the often unspoken

of you or me before our identity with Jesus Christ, is foreign to the Church as it is called to be. One reason for this is that all sorts of identity markers can be used to exclude and oppress, which brings us to a second point, that the markers of identity that could cause division or create differentiations of status in the Church have been decisively transcended in Christ<sup>68</sup> (the Church here, for its collusion in colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, class conflict, and capitalism has a multitude of reasons to sink to its knees and repent). We are baptised into a heavenly family, in which divisions between humans have no place. Here we need to have another look at Leviticus 18:22, and perhaps Acts 15:6-29. The levitical prohibition against man on man sex *depends on distinctions between male and female, Israelite and Canaanite*, distinctions which apparently no longer exist for those baptised into Christ Jesus. If this is the case, then the categories that originally gave meaning to the prohibition no longer exist either, leaving a blanket exclusion of relationships between persons of the same sex without any clear rationale. The question then is whether there are circumstances in which such relationships can be found to cohere with our justification by faith outside the categories of the Law.

### *The Epistles of the New Testament*

#### *The problem of desire*

The Epistles present slightly different pictures of marriage and sexual relationships to what we find in the Gospels. Here we come across *desire* as a theological problem. In 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, Saint Paul presents sexual abstinence as an ideal, but sex between one man and one woman as the remedy for those who do not have the gift of sexual continence. Again, it is not an ideal for Christians, and it is not primarily for procreation and the nurture of children, presumably on account of the fact that the eschaton was thought to be imminent: rather, marriage is for people who just cannot live without orgasms. We have, in fact, another textual problem in this passage. Thanks to the fact that early Greek manuscripts had no punctuation, it is not clear exactly what problem Saint Paul is addressing: is “It is good for a man not to take a woman” his own view, or a quotation of a view taken by his addressees? If the latter, then Saint Paul is actually somewhat more liberal than his addressees in Corinth!

But there is a deeper issue here, and that is our attitude to desire. We struggle, it seems to me, with love and desire alike, because we struggle to distinguish them from what the New Testament calls “lust” (ἐπιθυμία);<sup>69</sup> the English word “love,” in any case, overlaps imperfectly with the much richer and more complex Greek language of love, better attested in classical Greek literature than in the New Testament. Not all love, or even desire, for another person is a matter of lust for

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assumption that one particular set of gender identities (male and female, under one particular society’s definition) and one particular set of sexual relationships are, and must be, normal; its purpose could be to expose the way certain people’s lives, loves, desires, emotions are pushed aside, perhaps even presented without further ado as sick. The most dangerous ideological moves are those that are made silently (examples of this could be multiplied *ad infinitum*, especially in light of the grosser consequences of colonialism).

<sup>68</sup> It must be noted here that Saint Paul is not quite consistent on this (see esp. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

<sup>69</sup> This term and its cognates are used in the passage cited above from Plato’s *Symposium* without the negative connotations attached to it in the New Testament.

their bodies, but the ambiguity is uncomfortable, and leaves us doubting ourselves and others. What I am getting at here is that our bodily desires are difficult to capture in language, and they are often surprising and anarchic, and dangerous when allowed to spin out of control. It can be very uncomfortable, then, to have to reckon with desire without a Law to keep it in check. The Song of Songs, above all, recognises this, with the woman warning her companions not to awaken love until it is willing (Song of Songs 2:7). The Song, of course, is the most dangerous of books, perhaps a celebration of bodily desire outside the Law and the heteropatriarchal strictures of ancient Israelite marriage, or perhaps a celebration of bodily desire in Eden itself. It was both too much and not quite enough for the Fathers of the Church: was their ceaseless allegorical re-reading of the book a suppression of erotic desire by those committed to monkhood, or a celebration of the genuinely erotic desire between the Christian and his divine lover?

But returning to 1 Corinthians 7:1-40: all this raises a significant question when it comes to same-sex relationships. Is it better for those whose desire is for members of their own sex to be bonded in a committed partnership, if they do not have the gift of permanent sexual abstinence, rather than to be left at the mercy of their bodily urges? Posing this question in the context of a reading of 1 Corinthians is a difficult matter, because just a few verses ago, Saint Paul has apparently reminded his hearers that “men who have sex with men” (ἀρσενικοῖται) will not inherit the kingdom of God, nor will an assortment of other miscreants. There are several layers to the problem. So when Paul uses the unusual word ἀρσενικοῖται, is he referring to “all men who have sex with men” without exception, or only men who engage in certain kinds of man on man sex, such as the sexual domination of slaves, or of young boys?<sup>70</sup> The text does not clearly say, but I pose the problem like this because here, and in Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Timothy 1:10 as well, we may have cause to wonder how far our categories and those known to Saint Paul actually correspond. In spite of some modern Bible translations — which frequently impede rather than assist the difficult task of hermeneutics — it is not at all clear to me that a word such as “homosexual,” not used in English until the late nineteenth century, and representing a concept cobbled together from a range of other ideas, overlaps very much with Saint Paul’s concept of “a man who sleeps with another man” (ἀρσενικοῖτης): were the men in love? Were they attracted to other men by orientation, or by a desire to exert power, or just by a need to get sexual release without caring for the needs of their “partner”? The difficulty here is that even those who do the very difficult work of Greek lexicography are themselves shaped by the categories of *their* culture as much as of those of their sources, so that one of the Greek lexica on my desk can render this word into English as “a male homosexual,

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<sup>70</sup> I am not referring here to the love of an older, free man for a younger, free man, or παιδεραστία, which is the subject of Plato’s dialogues *Symposium* and (to some extent) *Phaedrus*, and which seems to have been the subject of intense moral debate in fourth century Athens. It is not clear to me that this was an issue considered by the authors of the New Testament; they do not, at any rate, use the language of “older male lover” (ἐραστής) and “younger male beloved” (ἐρώμενος) when referring to sex between men.

pederast, sodomite,”<sup>71</sup> which are themselves not the same thing. Is it *the fact of a man having sex with another man* that is the problem, or is it *the moral turpitude that was associated with certain kinds of man on man sex in Paul’s mind or world* that makes him put these men in a vice list?

I ask this because I seriously wonder what degree of moral equivalence there is between two persons of the same sex who love each other deeply, sacrificially, for life, and who happen to express that love by sharing each other’s bodies, and “fornicators” (πόρνοι), “idol worshippers” (εἰδωλόλατραι), “those who commit adultery” (μοιχοί), “thieves” (κλέπται), “those who are greedy” (πλεονέκται), “drunkards” (μέθυσοι), “those who are abusive” (λοίδοροι), and “robbers” (ἄρπαγες). Perhaps my mind is so fallen and clouded that I cannot see clearly, but it seems to me that the moral issue confronting the Church is not one that Saint Paul actually addressed. It may well be that were Saint Paul here today, he would automatically equate people in same-sex relationships with the revolting sinners he refers to in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, but that does not mean he would be right; it is not, in any case, our task to ask “what would Paul do,” but to discern, based on the resources we have (which of course includes the Epistles of Paul), how to live as the Church in a situation in some ways (though not all) profoundly different from his. We need to be extremely careful not to assume that concepts from Scripture can be applied without further ado to concepts — indeed, to *people* — in our world: someone in a same-sex relationship is not *ipso facto* an idolater (*pace* Romans 1:18-32?). To suggest otherwise is not only linguistically problematic, but suggestive of moral laziness: part of the challenge of living morally as Christians is that of discerning what to do when we are confronted with situations for which Scripture, Tradition, and Reason *do not* provide simple, black and white answers, particularly when the situations in question involve people who simply do not fit easily into old categories, or who fit new categories that were unknown when our authoritative sources were compiled. It is little more than moral cowardice to impose a borrowed category on someone, or on some group, that does not quite fit it, without making the effort to wonder what life looks like when seen through *their* eyes, rather than what we suppose are the eyes of our tradition. And lest it not go without saying, to admit this is *not* necessarily to begin sliding down a slippery slope that will eventually leave us all campaigning for the right to have sex with animals.

#### *The problem of nature*

Some recent treatments of issues of human sexuality in Scripture construct out of the biblical texts a code of sexual ethics based on a combination of a form of natural law<sup>72</sup> — we ought to live in accordance with nature — and divine command — we are compelled by God to live like this, because He says so (Robert Gagnon’s book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* would be a detailed example of this combined approach). What makes the combination possible, in relation to debates around the

<sup>71</sup> BAG<sup>2</sup> 109a. LSJ<sup>9</sup> 246b gives “sodomite” for ἄρρενοκοίτης.

<sup>72</sup> This has been a major factor in the Roman Catholic objection to homosexual relationships: “They are contrary to the natural law” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2357).

prohibition of homosexual relationships, is reading Genesis 1-3 as a blueprint for the divine intention for human sexual relationships, and Saint Paul's use of the category "nature" to object to homosexual relationships in Romans 1:26-27. There are manifold problems and ironies here, of which I will name only three.

First, we are not simply dealing with a reading of Genesis 1-3 qualified by Saint Paul. Why not? Because Saint Paul's own use of the idea of "nature" does *not* come from the Hebrew Bible alone — indeed, the Greek noun φύσις is *never* used in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, and only appears in the late, *Greek* works 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and the Wisdom of Solomon — but from the effect on his thinking of Plato and Aristotle, and their intellectual successors, whether directly or indirectly. That is, he has taken an idea that works in, and would be meaningful in the context of, an environment shaped by Greek philosophy, and has read his Hebrew scriptural tradition in light of it. This need not have been conscious, and in fact the evidence of the Jewish literature of the Hellenistic and Roman periods — Philo of Alexandria, for example, or the Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides — shows just how difficult it is to disentangle Jewish and Greek ideas from each another.

Second, the idea "nature" confronts us with the serious problem of where our theology begins: do we begin with revelation, however defined, and read material, bodily, realities in light of a theology "from above," or do we start with the messiness of our embodied selves, and construct a theology "from below"? Trying to do one or the other consistently leads to serious theological and ethical difficulties, and Graham Ward has shown how inadequate Barth's attempt to construe human sexual relationships in light of a theology "from above" actually is. He ends up confusing *human* categories of sex and gender with what is *divinely ordained*.<sup>73</sup> This is hardly surprising given the entanglement of divine inspiration with human words and categories in Holy Scripture, but is ethically very risky, because what we can end up with is a poisonous ideological brew in which positions of power are invested with divine authority, and those who don't fit get pushed aside and defined by categories that don't match who they are or how they live; what makes this doubly dangerous is that *the Gospel is in fact meant to trouble our assumptions*: yet sometimes we risk co-opting the language of the Gospel in support of the powerful assumptions *we* would like to hang on to.

Third, echoing both the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* and Graham Ward's critique of Barth, I would like to suggest that we spring too easily towards equating "nature" with the way we think physical bodies work. What if the real quest for one's other in "nature" were a spiritual quest as much as a physical one, a quest determined by spiritual complementarity more than by biological sex and the language we customarily use to analyse and categorize it?

In recent uses of "nature" to reject the validity of homosexual relationships, the argument appears in a form like this: Saint Paul rejected homosexual relationships because *they contravene God's order for the two biological sexes in creation*; we see this order for creation *laid out in Scripture, in Genesis 1-3*; and, moreover, we can see this borne out

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<sup>73</sup> See Ward, "The Erotics of Redemption — After Karl Barth."

*in the fact that the bodies of men and women are sexually complementary.* But is this how the argument works, in fact? Or do we rather *begin with the assumption* that heterosexual relationships are normal, preferable, obviously the only valid ones, and find, conveniently, that we can marshal the authors of the Epistle to the Romans, and then the Book of Genesis, to our defence? That is, when we think we are doing theology from above (Scripture as a witness to divine revelation), we may actually be doing theology from below (what we think we can see in the world around us), and thereby cutting God down to our size.

Saint Paul's use of the category "nature" (φύσις), then, is extremely problematic, and whether we are prepared to accept this or not, the fact is that his use of it is both inconsistent, and troubling for the modern Church. In the context of the current debate, Romans 1:26-27 is the key passage here. Saint Paul refers to men and women who have given up the natural use of another's body and exchanged it for that which is against nature (παρὰ φύσιν). In the context of Romans 1:18-32, God has surrendered idol worshippers, who should have known their worship was wrong, to degrading passions, which includes homosexual lust, but is by no means limited to it. In the wider context, it is part of Saint Paul's argument that his addressees are hypocrites, because they condemn others for sins they themselves are committing (why is it, do you suppose, that we immediately leap to homosexuality rather than, say, defamation, envy, arrogance, or disobedience to one's parents as the most pressing moral issue here? How might the Church be different if we were to take seriously the gross spiritual corrosion caused by being "without mercy," ἀνελεήμων [Romans 1:31]?).

Two things are immediately noteworthy: it is *God Himself* who gives idolaters up to homosexual lust, as a sign of the revelation of His anger; and it is the hypocrisy of Saint Paul's addressees, not the perversion of same-sex oriented persons in the Church in general, that is the target. Strictly speaking, Saint Paul is not condemning homosexual relationships, but hypocrisy, and in any case, he *assumes same-sex relationships of some sort are wrong*, he does not condemn them as such. Again, he does not seem to have in mind persons of deep Christian faith in a loving, committed, stable relationship and, moreover, as is now well known, he has no understanding, it would seem, of people being oriented towards their own sex simply because that is how they happen to be wired (I am going to leave out of consideration whether this wiring is primarily a matter of biology or primarily a matter of social conditioning — I am not competent to judge this, and too much ideological capital can be made out of the use of one theory or the other for them to be of much help to our process of discernment at this point). Here we must confront the undoubtedly disturbing possibility that Saint Paul, through whom God was pleased to shine the light of the Gospel, *could be wrong* about something.

Here the question of "nature" needs to be considered. I am not convinced that it is helpful to argue that some people are homosexual *by nature*, and they are left out of consideration by Saint Paul, because he is attacking *heterosexuals* who go after others of their own sex against the dictates of their own nature; that is *not* how he uses the word "nature" (φύσις). He is appealing to what he believes to be the natural order of creation, to which everyone is answerable, and it is here that there has to be

debate. It seems to me, from the way he uses this word elsewhere, that Saint Paul was confusing custom with nature, something that should be a salutary lesson to all of us when we look at the world and think we grasp how things really are. In particular, he sees the natural order as involving the male domination of a woman; for men to have sex (literally) in men<sup>74</sup> (ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν) was to violate that order by making a man play the part of a woman (cf. Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; 1 Corinthians 11:3).

There are several cases where Saint Paul's use of φύσις seems relatively uncomplicated. Thus he uses φύσει to mean something like "instinctively" in Romans 2:14; in 2:27, ἡ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία seems to mean "those who in their natural state are not circumcised," a usage not dissimilar to 11:21, where Saint Paul refers to Jews as "natural" (κατὰ φύσιν) branches, i.e., branches that have not been grafted on artificially, and 11:24, where Gentile Christians are described as having been cut off what is "by nature" (κατὰ φύσιν) a wild olive tree and grafted into a cultivated olive tree "against nature" (παρὰ φύσιν). Similarly, in Galatians 2:15 Saint Paul describes himself and his companions as Jews "by nature" (φύσει) and not Gentile sinners. In contrast, in Galatians 4:8 he describes his addressees as having been slaves to beings that were "by nature" (φύσει)<sup>75</sup> not gods, i.e. non-Jewish deities. The author of the Epistle to the Ephesians claims that he and (apparently) his addressees were once "children of wrath by nature" (τέκνα φύσει ὀργῆς). The noun φύσις appears to mean "species" in James 3:7. In 2 Peter 1:4, the goal of the Christian life is to become "sharers of the divine nature" (θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως).

A clear example of Saint Paul confusing custom with nature is in his discussion of whether women should wear head coverings of some sort during worship. This difficult passage has generated vast discussion, especially among those who have a stake in the place of women in the Christian home and the worship of the Christian Church.<sup>76</sup> Here there is a clear chain of being, from God, through Christ, to man, and then to woman: a man alone is "the image and glory of God" (εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ), and as such must not cover his head; a woman is the glory of man (δόξα ἀνδρός) and must have her head covered. In an odd twist, Saint Paul invites the Corinthians to consider whether nature itself teaches that it is degrading for a man to have long hair (οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις αὐτὴ διδάσκει ὑμᾶς ὅτι ἀνὴρ μὲν ἐὰν κομᾶ ἀτιμία αὐτῷ ἐστίν), but for a woman it is her glory (γυνὴ δὲ ἐὰν κομᾶ δόξα αὐτῇ ἐστίν), nature's own covering for her head. Saint Paul seems to be confusing what is customary with what is given in nature, and mixing it with a discourse of honour and shame, which is itself socially constructed. *Why* is it so obvious that men should not wear their hair long — where would that leave Samson and Absalom in the Hebrew Bible, for example, for whom long hair is a sign connoting strength and

<sup>74</sup> Cf. William G. Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 315-316. Robert Jewett, followed cautiously by Loader, has gone so far as to see τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει ... ἀπολαμβάνοντες as referring to a man working his erect penis into another's anus, and to the inevitable soreness of penis and anus resulting from the tightness of the anus (*Romans* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007], 179-190; cited in Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 318). Where might this leave gay partners who have no interest in anal sex?

<sup>75</sup> A small number of witnesses omit φύσει.

<sup>76</sup> See now Gillian Townsley, "The Straight Mind in Corinth: Queer Readings Across 1 Cor 11.2-16" (Ph.D. diss., University of Otago, 2011).



virility, not shame? Perhaps he senses this weakness in his argument when he admits that neither he nor the assemblies of God have such a “custom” (συνήθεια). Notably, Saint Paul is here seeking to guard the peace and unity of the Church (1 Corinthians 11:16).

Saint Paul’s error here should make us wary of identifying what is “natural” too quickly. This should stand as a warning against idolizing Scripture, made up of *human* works that, both through and in spite of their humanity, bear witness by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the Word of God; it should also make us wary not only of taking Saint Paul at his word when he describes homosexual desire as “against nature” (παρὰ φύσιν), but of reading an order of nature into Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18, 24. Moreover, the fact that people experience a range of desires, not simply directed at the opposite sex, would seem to suggest that “nature” is a lot more complicated than we might like it to be. In particular, it is exceptionally dangerous to suppose we can simply lift a questionable construction of what “nature” teaches out of an ancient text and use it to diagnose the spiritual health of a modern person’s desires, and the various Christian ministries that exist with the aim — in all good faith — of treating people’s homosexual desires should be regarded with the profoundest disapprobation.

In any case, there again seems to be a mismatch between the pastoral crisis currently confronting the Church and what Saint Paul has in mind: if he is not referring to persons who seek to worship God through Jesus Christ, while living in a committed, same-sex partnership, then it is not clear he is addressing the same problem as we are. There seems to be serious doubt as to how far the kinds of people by whom Saint Paul is so appalled in Romans 1:18-32 overlap with the kinds of people who are currently seeking to take their place — or rather, to have their place recognised — in the Church today.

#### *Beyond the usual texts*

One of the key hermeneutical problems is working out which biblical texts are most relevant to modern concerns about sexual relationships. Because our questions and assumptions overlap imperfectly with those of the authors of the biblical texts, we cannot assume that Romans 1:26-27 or 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 are necessarily the right texts to focus on when we are dealing with committed same-sex partnerships, characterised by lifelong devotion and sacrificial love, where the partners have a deep faith in Jesus. In light of this, there are three things to consider: first, are there texts that point to deeper Christian values that might suggest that sexual relationships other than between a dominant man and a subordinate woman have something to say to our modern dilemmas? Second, are there texts that point to significant changes in the way the early Christians understood themselves before God that might be seen as analogous to modern shifts in understanding the worth of same-sex relationships? Third, and perhaps most important, are there texts that suggest how the Church might deal with disagreements between members who hold profoundly opposed positions in good faith? This is a crucial question, because it takes us to the heart of what it means to be the Church. Our current dilemmas force us to confront the most fundamental questions of ecclesiology.

So what deeper values might we draw on to inform our debate? If we turn back to Galatians, Saint Paul takes “faith working through love” as a basic marker of living in Christ, and holds on to the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself from the commandments of Leviticus (Leviticus 19:18) as the one thing from the Law that is still operative. This, I think we can agree, raises as many problems as it solves, because who decides what “love” is? Saint Paul goes on to distinguish between acts marked by our sinful nature on the one hand, and the fruits of the Spirit on the other. This is where things get really difficult. Should we automatically regard same-sex relationships as evidence of our corrupt, sinful nature, and thus as “fornication” by definition, or should we look at what characterises particular relationships, and ask whether relationships marked by lifelong commitment and sacrificial love are, in fact, evidence of the fruits of the Spirit? There is no denying that this is an exceptionally difficult piece of discernment, but before we leap to the conclusion that of course same-sex relationships are the product of our sinful nature, we should consider what might draw us to such a conclusion. An issue I have not raised yet is the way our ethical decisions can be shaped by a deep sense of shame or disgust (cf. 1 Samuel 20:30; 1 Corinthians 11:14!). Just how far is the Christian use of Scripture in debates about sexuality governed by such unexamined prejudices, rather than by empathy with another, perhaps another whose life has been scarred by being made, by others, to interpret her or his own deepest desire as something worthy of revulsion? I suggest that unexamined feelings of shame and disgust may be a deeply unreliable place to begin the task of hermeneutics.

There can be no doubt that there *are* occasions when the Church has discerned, sometimes against its own will, or the will of many of its members, that a deep change in its teaching is necessary. It is true that some of this may reflect poor discernment, but we have to take account of the fact that were it not for a profound shift in theological understanding, *the Gentile Church would not exist*. The problem here is one of analogy, since just because the Church’s teaching has changed at one point does *not* entail that the Church’s teaching must change at another. The most obvious shift in the New Testament is around the Levitical food laws, which are taken away as the Gospel is taken from Israel to the Gentiles (esp. Acts 10:9-16; cf. Mark 7:19). This raises, once more, the question of the distinction between Jew and Gentile, which even Jesus, according to Matthew, took so seriously that he was willing to ignore the pleas of a Canaanite woman who was begging him to heal her daughter (Matthew 15:21-28). It is true that the bringing in of the Gentiles to worship the God of Israel has very deep roots in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew scriptures, especially Isaiah, in a way that is not evidently true of the inclusion of people in non-celibate same-sex relationships; but I have argued above that the way Saint Paul frames the removal of distinctions between Jew and Greek in Christian baptism entails the removal of the rationale for prohibiting sex between men, which is defined in Leviticus in terms of gender and race. If this is so, then the inclusion of Gentiles as heirs of the Abrahamic promise without the Law leaves us with no theological basis on which to prohibit same-sex relationships.

There are other issues, too, which are sometimes invoked in connection with this debate. Until very recently, slavery, which is assumed not only as a fact of life but

as part of the structure of the ancient Roman *familia* in Scripture, was part of the working of the major Western economies. The concern of both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament is with the just treatment of slaves, not with the institution *per se*. Slavery is not, of course, defined in the same way in every context in which it is found — and it *is* still found, in a number of countries today, and many of our hands are bloodied by it — but the Church has discerned that relationships in which people are oppressed and brutalised in the way that slaves have been — and still are — are morally repugnant. Again, the analogy with same-sex relationships is far from obvious. Nevertheless, the question is whether *deeper, Christian values* have to be applied. That is, just as a commitment to deeper Christian values has led to the abandonment of an institution comparable with one that was taken for granted in the New Testament, can a commitment to the acceptance of sexual relationships that are not unequal, exploitative, and cruel lead us to a point where it is *this*, rather than the biological sex of the partners, that is viewed as the decisive factor (my analysis above of sexual relationships before and after the Fall may well be relevant here)?

Most Anglican churches ordain women to the priesthood, and some permit the consecration of women as bishops, in flagrant contradiction of clear biblical teaching. Saint John Chrysostom went so far as to claim that it was the divine law that prohibited women from entering the ministry.<sup>77</sup> Again, rightly or wrongly, the churches in question have discerned that deeper principles are at work that mean women can be ordained. In point of fact, I agree: to suggest that only a man can truly symbolise, and thus participate in, the priesthood of Christ is not only to reinstate a discarded division between genders, but to imply, heretically, that a man is inherently more redeemable, and thus closer to Christ, than a woman (but cf. 1 Corinthians 11:3!).<sup>78</sup> This is not to claim that there are no differences at all between genders — of course there are — merely to point out that they have no ultimate significance for our relationship to Christ. Now again, this is *not* the same as the acceptance of non-celibate same-sex relationships. Simply because the Church has moved on one issue does not mean it is compelled to move on another, and a question of admission to the sacrament of ordination is not obviously equivalent to a question about sexual ethics. But there is one key similarity, and that is that both the ordination of women and the acceptance of same-sex relationships depend on *a shift in our understanding of the nature of gender and its performance*. If, as I have suggested, there is no longer a theological rationale for the Levitical prohibition on man on man sex because gender differences have been transcended, that is not so very different from the acceptance of women as able to be ordained on the grounds that gender differences are not decisive in the way they seem to have been in parts of the New Testament.

Perhaps the most compelling question is how we can draw on the New Testament in ways that help us to live with, if not to overcome, a division in the Church that exists because Christians disagree with one another in good faith; and let us not forget that *it is our common faith in Jesus Christ* that makes the disagreement so

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<sup>77</sup> St John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood: Six Books* (trans. G. Neville; Popular Patristics Series 1; Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977; 1st ed. London: SPCK, 1964), 78.

<sup>78</sup> Saint Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is in profound — in fact irreconcilable — tension with Galatians 3:28, but it would be dangerous to try and harmonise them.

profound. Church unity is not an option for Christians, and indeed it could be argued that Christian disunity, and especially our inability to share the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist as one, is the profoundest scandal of the Church's life.<sup>79</sup> Christ prays, in John's Gospel, that his friends may be one, as he and the Father are one; we are called to keep the unity of the Spirit in bond of peace. A disagreement over sexuality, which is *not* a fundamental, cannot, must not, be allowed to fracture the Church any further. Indeed, while I have profound concerns over the content and intent of the Anglican Communion Covenant and its potential for ideological abuse, something that must be said in its favour is that it is an attempt to call the Anglican churches to recognise that Christian unity is not an option; we belong to one another in Christ (Romans 12:5), and to go our separate ways is nothing more or less than an attempt to place our ideological commitments between us and the Cross.

So what resources does the New Testament offer? Here the Epistle to the Romans is most helpful, especially chapters 14 and 15, because here Saint Paul has to address issues that appear to have threatened to drive a wedge between Jewish and Gentile members of the Roman Church. The key issues seem to have been to do with food and the liturgical calendar, both of which continue to divide particular denominations today (Seventh Day Adventists, for example, keep Sabbath on Saturday and do not eat meat; Western and some Eastern Christians celebrate Easter and Christmas on different dates, and have different customs regarding fasting; and so on). What Saint Paul stresses is that we are each accountable to God, and it is not up to us to pass judgement on one another, if we are living our Christian lives in good faith. At the same time, we belong to one another, and should resolve not to put a stumbling block before those who think and act differently. I suggest that it is *here*, not to the well known passages about man on man sex, that we need to look to address our current problems as a crisis of discernment, where the unity of the Body of Christ is at stake.

If we consider for a moment whether Romans 14-15 might apply to questions of sexuality, we are confronted with a very difficult problem of discernment. That is because we could take options that contradict each another: is a refusal to accept that people in same-sex relationships could be faithful Christians, answerable to their Lord before the Throne of Grace, a sign of weakness in faith?<sup>80</sup> Or is the acceptance of people in same-sex relationships in some parts of the Church putting an unacceptable stumbling block before sisters and brothers who, for whatever reason, *in good faith*, cannot accept that this is a sign of holiness in the Church? I suggest that it is *here* that the real problem of discernment lies. That is because the problem is *not* that people

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. Nicolai Zernov, *Orthodox Encounter: The Christian East and the Ecumenical Movement* (London: James Clarke and Co., 1961), 1: "There is no greater challenge to the veracity of the Christian faith than the existence of separated denominations within contemporary Christendom."

<sup>80</sup> F. Gerald Downing has suggested that those referred to by St Paul in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 are weak in the sense of being "convention bound," and that in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, the apostle caves in to socially acceptable Greek understandings of the distinction between male and female as a concession to the weak in Corinth ("The Nature(s) of Christian Women and Men," *Theology* 108 (May-June 2005): 178-184 (181)). I am not entirely convinced: I wonder if the simplest explanation is that Saint Paul is, in fact, inconsistent, and hasn't fully worked out the implications of his own earlier claim in Galatians 3:28.

are clamouring for the right to commit what everyone knows are gross sins; the problem is that Christians, in good faith, are disagreeing over the validity of others' lives and loves, in ways that gravely threaten our ability to recognise one another as fellow members of the household of God.

Compounding this problem is the way we do things as a Church. Is a Church that is perceived by many of its members to require strong and unambiguous moral leadership on matters of sexual ethics open enough to allow the generosity implied by Saint Paul's advice to the disagreeing Christians of Rome? I fear not: our unresolved need for a Law, combined with our attachment as Anglicans to quasi-democratic synodical government, leaves us in a position where we seem to be unable to move forward unless an unequivocal moral stand is taken, despite the fact that the Instruments of Communion do not easily provide for that (I sometimes wonder whether we actually want the Church, from the top, to take the decision we most disagree with, because that would confirm us in our conviction that we are right). Might we not learn to trust one another's faith enough to allow them to come before their Lord, giving Him honour out of the treasure of their lives, without passing judgement on them as if they were *our* servants, not His? What if the Church were to gather before the altar for the Holy Eucharist, recognising that it is not one of us but *Christ* who is the Priest, as He is the Victim, leaving our sisters and brothers to work out their salvation in fear and trembling without juridical interference from us?

But as yet I have left one of the most fundamental questions of ecclesiology overlooked; in fact I suspect that in much of the Western Church we have forgotten it (again, would we forget if we worshipped *ad orientem*?). The Church is, above all, the *mystical* Body of Christ and, in light of Ephesians and Colossians in particular, must be understood as being in conflict not simply around contradictory human claims, but with the spiritual forces that work to break the Church apart. This is deeply unfashionable language, but perhaps the lack of fashion here is significant: we have become ignorant of the spiritual battle in which we are caught up,<sup>81</sup> and it is perhaps here above all that we need to see the Church's current troubles as a deep crisis of *discernment*.

#### *For the kingdom of heaven*

The priority given in the New Testament to sexual abstinence on account of the *eschatological* identity of the Church raises some serious questions about how the Church today is supposed to live, especially when as the Church we continue, week by week, to affirm our belief in "the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come." Is our focus on the goal of the Christian life, which is union with God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, or is it on the ephemera of our earthly lives? Perhaps, instead of wondering whether sexual relationships between persons of the same sex can be equal before God to a sexual relationships between a man and

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<sup>81</sup> David Baker makes a very similar point in "Jesus, the bishops and civil partnerships" (<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/jesus.the.bishops.and.civil.partnerships/31406.htm>, accessed January 8, 2013). Baker, in this article, makes the very pertinent point that huge potential for division exists simply because the various interlocutors in the debate cannot even agree on what they are, in fact, talking about.

a woman in marriage, we should be wondering whether our lack of a robust theological account of *celibacy*, not simply as a default setting for those who happen not to be in a licit heterosexual marriage, but precisely as a Christian ideal, is a lack that desperately needs to be remedied if the Church is to be spiritually healthy and true to its biblical roots. Furthermore, perhaps we should be wondering why the Church also lacks a robust theological account of *friendship*, despite the rich Christian heritage of reflection on precisely this. Perhaps it is the Reformation rejection of clerical celibacy (and celibate clericalism)<sup>82</sup> whose impact is being felt here in Anglicanism, something that the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century, with its retrieval of the heritage of medieval monasticism, could not decisively undo. Celibacy and friendship need to be understood adequately in the Church, because it is tragically careless simply to expect unattached Christians of whatever orientation to be sexually abstinent without providing in other ways, within the Body of Christ, for their need for emotional intimacy.

It is here that objections to men in celibate same-sex civil partnerships becoming bishops in the Church of England must be regarded as incoherent,<sup>83</sup> just as the prohibition on women who are priests being consecrated as bishops has been shown by Sarah Coakley to be incoherent, albeit on different grounds;<sup>84</sup> it is probably no coincidence that these two issues are before the Church at the same time, and lamentable that they both show up the incoherence, perhaps even the moral bankruptcy, of current Anglican Theology. The consecration of bishops in same-sex civil unions has not yet been tested in New Zealand, but in England this goes back to the abandoned appointment of Jeffrey John as Suffragan Bishop of Reading in 2003, and is a very different matter from the consecration of Gene Robinson, a man in a non-celibate partnership, as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003; it is *not* the case — or perhaps it *should not be* the case — *pace* Philip Giddings and Chris Sugden, that it is “casuistical” to claim that a distinction can be made between celibate and non-celibate civil partnerships.<sup>85</sup> The problem here is that someone in a committed celibate

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<sup>82</sup> On which see Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 60-82.

<sup>83</sup> As noted, for example, by William Oddie in “Dr Jeffrey John is a man of integrity,” *Catholic Herald* (July 7, 2010) (<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2010/07/07/dr-jeffrey-john-is-a-man-of-integrity/>, accessed January 8, 2013). Oddie has, however, backtracked from his position in this article, and taken the position that since civil partnerships normally do involve sex, the Catholic Church should oppose them without ambiguity (cf. the position taken by Philip Giddings and Chris Sugden below): “The Soho masses are now to be discontinued; and the ordinariate has its ‘cathedral’; all we need now is to clarify Catholic teaching on civil unions,” *Catholic Herald* (January 7, 2013) (<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2013/01/07/the-soho-masses-are-now-to-be-discontinued-and-the-ordinariate-has-its-cathedral-all-we-need-now-is-to-clarify-catholic-teaching-on-civil-unions/>, accessed January 10, 2013).

<sup>84</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Has the Church of England finally lost its reason? Women bishops and the collapse of Anglican Theology” (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/11/23/3639111.htm>, accessed January 8, 2013).

<sup>85</sup> Giddings and Sugden argue that, “Most people assume that civil partnerships are sexual relationships. It is casuistical to claim that they are not” (“Evangelical backlash follows England’s decision to allow ‘gay’ bishops,” <http://www.anglicanink.com/article/evangelical-backlash-follows-englands-decision-allow-gay-bishops>, accessed January 9, 2013). Surely the problem is with the perceived limitation of civil partnerships to sexual relationships: why should celibate friends with a deep love for each other not honour that with some form of legal partnership? Archbishop Ntagali of Uganda’s claim that the House of Bishops’ decision is “no different from allowing gay bishops,” and that it “violates our Biblical faith and agreements within the Anglican communion” (loc. cit.) is simply false, and it is the

partnership is not living in contravention of any of the moral teaching found in the New Testament; indeed, there are strong traditions of particular friendships in the history of the Church.<sup>86</sup> The fact that the partners happen to be of the same sex is neither here nor there. Their sexual orientation is, furthermore, *irrelevant*.

In fact, objections *on the grounds of sexual orientation* raise one of four sinister possibilities: that homosexual orientation, about which nothing is clearly written in Scripture, is *ipso facto* evidence of being somewhat less redeemed (or, worse, less redeemable, more fallen) than heterosexual Christians;<sup>87</sup> or that people in same-sex partnerships who claim to be celibate should be regarded as *ipso facto* untrustworthy, assumed to be lying about their state of life;<sup>88</sup> or that people in same-sex partnerships who claim to be celibate must be regarded as *ipso facto* incapable of living thus;<sup>89</sup> or, perhaps worst of all, that the Church should become an Orwellian dystopia, in which our trust in one another has become so macerated that we need to police one another's bedrooms in order to be absolutely sure our sisters and brothers are worthy of our God's grace.

Objections on the grounds that no meaningful distinction can be made between sexual and non-sexual civil partnerships raise the possibility that it is really the objectors to, not the defenders of, such partnerships whose thinking has been overwhelmed by our modern obsession with sex, our strange inability to believe that some human beings can actually function without it. The only morally serious

restriction of moral imagination, and paucity of historical awareness, implied by such claims that is the real locus of moral crisis for the Church.

<sup>86</sup> The classic text on this is Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia* (= *On spiritual friendship*), an eleventh century CE Christian re-working of Cicero's dialogue *Laelius de amicitia*. The best recent treatment of friendship in the Christian tradition is Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>87</sup> This position is, thankfully, explicitly disavowed by Rev. Linda Rose of Anglican Mainstream in her response. See "Gay bishops: Bible 'prohibits' homosexual relationships" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20919479>, accessed January 8, 2013).

<sup>88</sup> The possibility of bishops lying about their state of life may well be implied by the claim that the Church's policy is unenforceable, which appears to be the main concern of both Rod Thomas of Reform and Linda Rose of Anglican Mainstream. See "Mixed response to CofE decision to allow gay bishops" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20918806>, accessed January 8, 2013) and "Gay bishops: Bible 'prohibits' homosexual relationships" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20919479>, accessed January 8, 2013). The question of whether bishops in non-celibate same-sex partnerships are *morally obligated* to lie about their state of life has recently been raised by Rev. Giles Fraser in "Why gay bishops have to lie," *The Guardian* (January 6, 2013)

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/06/why-gay-bishops-have-to-lie>, accessed January 8, 2013). The basis for this, claims Fraser, is that sometimes, as here, "we lie because we don't trust another with the truth." His concern is certainly not unjustified, but the fact that a priest feels able to frame the issue in these terms is deeply troubling for the moral integrity of the Church.

Predictably, Fraser's remarks have provoked negative response, sadly without attending to the depth of Fraser's argument, which is in fact a call for honesty and integrity in the Church. See Jake Wallis Simons, "So gay bishops should have sex and lie about it. Really, Giles Fraser?" *The Telegraph* (January 8, 2013) (<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/jakewallisimons/100196949/so-gay-bishops-should-have-sex-and-lie-about-it-really-giles-fraser/>, accessed January 8, 2013, and <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2013/01/07/so-gay-bishops-should-have-sex-and-lie-about-it-really-giles-fraser/>, accessed January 8, 2013).

<sup>89</sup> Saint Paul, of course, counselled married couples in Corinth to consider abstaining from sex for certain periods (1 Corinthians 7:5). While such couples were obviously not permanently celibate, this does go to show that for Saint Paul, at least, the couples' lives were to be focused ultimately on God, not on sex, and should be marked by self-control.

objections that could be made are on the grounds of Church unity, to which I alluded above — albeit inconclusively — in my remarks on Romans 14-15.

*Why the Church needs to shut up and be silent before God*

The Church has generated a great deal of heat — though arguably not very much light — talking about Scripture, Theology, and sexuality. Indeed, we have talked and written so much that the best counsel that could be offered right now might be that we stop talking and writing, and sit or kneel in silence before God. I have spoken several times here about the problem of language. Perhaps the key problem with language is that it is *our* language, by which I mean *human* language, a means of sacramental blessing, and a means of curse and confusion (James 3:9). Whether we like it or not, all language is ideological, scarred with the wounds of battles over ideas, wounds generated by our clumsy politics of truth. When it comes to debates around sexuality, there are just too many words, and the people who are most seriously affected by those words have got lost in the fray. We need to learn how to sit silently with one another, humbly before God. Not all silence is a collusion in oppression, or a means of obscuring awkward facts that we wish weren't there (though some silence most certainly is). Silence can be a means of healing, and of patient waiting for God's Word; it can also be a way of recognising that our minds and bodies are mysterious in a way that defies our poor language to contain. In any case, not all things need to be said. One of the more harmful things about our debates around sexuality is that there seems to be an assumption that everyone has a right to know everything about the sex lives of our sisters and brothers ("coming out," which can be a deeply affirming process, of course has a dark side, whereby those who do not proclaim their sexual desires from the rooftops are assumed to be deceiving us).<sup>90</sup> Can we trust one another enough to leave some things untouched in the private space in which our sisters and brothers seek God's mercy before the Throne of Grace?

Having said this, there are some things that, at the present time, do urgently need to be spoken. Allegedly the Anglican Church's dilemma has been created by three issues: the ordination of people in same-sex relationships, one diocese's authorisation of liturgies for the blessing of same-sex relationships, and the exercise by some bishops of episcopal jurisdiction in dioceses where they have no right to exercise it. But what if we frame the situation differently? What if we instead ask whether the Church has a deep moral obligation to develop a theologically robust account of, and pastoral response to, homophobia and its effects? This is particularly difficult for the Church because Scripture and the Christian tradition are core elements in the genealogy of homophobia, raising the question of whether the real unholy alliance is not between liberals in the Church and the forces of secularism, but between *homophobic Christians* and those in wider society who share this obnoxious prejudice (doubtless the real situation is much more complex than this). Like all language, the ideologically-conditioned language of Scripture and the Christian tradition is a source of both curse and blessing. Is the most pressing moral issue here the possibility of loving, non-celibate sexual relationships being accepted, even

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<sup>90</sup> Yet when they do, they are assumed to be obsessed with sex ...



honoured, in the Church, or is it the sentence of death that could hang over such relationships in parts of the Anglican communion and elsewhere?

I have become deeply suspicious of the Church's use of the language of "justice" and "rights," not because they do not exist, but because they are so open to ideological manipulation. Such language is integral to Scripture, especially the socio-economic critique attributed to some of the prophets of Israel and Judah, but we are in danger of importing a secularised version of it back into the Church without attending to our own theological resources first. Here I want to pick up again on the image of God. In the moral imagination of parts of Genesis, the fact that every human being without exception bears God's image creates in them what might be termed a right not to be put to death (Genesis 9:5-6). However we treat other parts of Scripture, this must be at the very core of any Jewish or Christian approach to ethics.

I would like at this point to go on a brief autobiographical digression. What is really at stake here came home powerfully to me through two events. The first was a conversation I had with a fellow church member in the mid-1990's, when I was a member of a small Anglican church in inner-city Manchester. At the time I was struggling with my own recent conversion to Christianity, my gradual shift from evangelicalism to a sort of progressive catholicism, my own sexual attraction to other men and the various internal conflicts that engendered, and the beginnings of vocation to the priesthood. Our conversation turned to the question of same-sex relationships, and my interlocutor's disgust at the idea became abundantly clear. I challenged him about how we might address the devastating effect of the Church's opposition to same-sex relationships on mental health, in particular on those who feel driven to suicide by it.<sup>91</sup> His response has haunted me ever since: "These suicides are good, because soon society will be rid of this evil." There is, surely, something seriously wrong when *something* about the Church's teaching enables this kind of attitude to go unhindered and to flourish.

The second event was a few years later, during the 1998 Lambeth Conference. The media's grotesque obsession with the Church's difficulties with sexuality reached a new low when the most newsworthy event of one day of the conference turned out to be the attempted exorcism of the General Secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, Richard Kirker, by Emmanuel Chukwuma, Bishop of Enugu in Nigeria.<sup>92</sup> The television coverage of this revolting — not to say theologically bankrupt — spectacle left me feeling nauseated, not just because it seemed to be so obviously wrong, but, more disturbingly, because it fed the deeply internalised homophobia that had, for years, shaped my own sense of myself. We are not simply dealing here with how members of the Church should conduct their lives: we are dealing with how the ways in which our moral debates are framed and conducted

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<sup>91</sup> Steve Chalke has recently written movingly on this theme, from a broadly evangelical perspective. See his "A Matter of Integrity: The Church, Sexuality, Inclusion, and an Open Conversation," [http://www.oasisuk.org/article.aspx?menuId=31887#\\_ftn23](http://www.oasisuk.org/article.aspx?menuId=31887#_ftn23), accessed January 15, 2013.

<sup>92</sup> The exorcism apparently didn't work. On the website of the Diocese of Enugu, we are told that Bishop Chukwuma "[d]efended Christian faith in England against the homosexuals in 1998 Lambeth Conference of Bishops" ([http://enuguanglicandiocese.org/bishop\\_profile.htm](http://enuguanglicandiocese.org/bishop_profile.htm), accessed January 22, 2013), alongside a range of other — frankly admirable — acts of Christian service.

affect the way people see themselves, how they interpret their standing before God, and thus with the state of their mental health.

Here we come to the heart of the problem. When we discuss the nexus between Scripture, Theology, and sexuality, we are not simply dealing with disembodied ideas, whose only effect is on the way we structure our thinking. We are dealing with difficult and challenging ideas that relate in complex ways to deeply held prejudices, where the effects of both the ideas and the prejudices impact profoundly on the self-awareness of real, flesh-and-blood people. It cannot be enough “to love the sinner and hate the sin,” to condemn a way of life while claiming that the drive that makes the lifestyle possible is morally neutral, if the *effect* of this is to deepen a person’s estrangement from themselves, or to leave an already existing self-estrangement untouched, and to imply that same-sex oriented persons need to accept and live with a deeper division between their bodies and whatever else makes up their humanity than do opposite-sex oriented persons. All this holds *regardless* of the position one ultimately takes on the moral status of non-celibate same-sex relationships. In a fallen world, all of our sins are interconnected:<sup>93</sup> my voluntary and involuntary sins impact on people I will never see, which implicates me in their suffering. In light of this, the Church is morally bound to take account of the effects its thoughtless words and heedless actions might have.

### *Conclusion*

What should be abundantly clear is that Scripture does not provide a single vision of human relationships that enables us to come up with one, incontestable, moral code to govern sex. But this does not mean the only option is total moral anarchy, or a license to cherry-pick the scriptures that best support our own preferred position. In doing its work of discernment, the Church needs to prioritise two things, which are not necessarily directly to do with sex at all, and to be as fully aware as possible of a third. First, our business is *God*, the worship of God, and the patient, painstaking growth of each of us into the likeness of the Christ in whom God’s fractured image is restored. Second, we are the Body of Christ, and thus answerable to one another. The unity of the Church is neither one option among others for Christians, nor something we can build, brick by brick. It is a mystical reality, inseparable from the priority of our unity with Christ. It is only when we take these things with full seriousness that we will be able to come to some sense of how to deal Christianly with sex. Third, human beings are mysterious, and fit awkwardly into the categories we have received. We cannot assume that our received wisdom already tells us everything we need to know about who we are before one another and before God. In light of this in particular, we need to care gently for one another, not making them

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. Tikhon in Dostoyevsky, *Demons* (trans. R. A. Maguire; London: Penguin, 2008), 781, alluding to the clergy prayers before communion in the Orthodox Liturgy (cf. *The Divine Liturgy of Our Father Among the Saints John Chrysostom* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 43): “For my voluntary and involuntary sins. In sinning, each person has already sinned against all, and each person is in some way guilty for another person’s sin. There is no isolated sin. I am truly a great sinner, and perhaps greater than you.” In relation to Stavrogin’s confession, of course, Tikhon’s point is that Tikhon’s forgiveness of Stavrogin should entail Stavrogin’s forgiveness of Tikhon. How might this attitude, and the Theology it implies, shed light on our treatment of one another’s weaknesses in the Church?

fit into categories that would do violence to their integrity. Perhaps what the Church needs above all is a real sense of kindness, and a willingness, on the part of all of us, to be vulnerable enough to admit that it is not our business to tell our sisters and brothers how to come before Jesus; it is our business to walk by their side, and support them on the way.