

# **The ordination of homosexuals with regard to church unity.**

by Derek Thompson, Nov 2013

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## ***Introduction***

The Anglican Communion's Lambeth Conference of 1998 was irreconcilably divided on the subject of homosexuality. There were four alternatives, each of which could be shown to be internally consistent, rational, and cohere with Scripture (Gill, 2012, pp. 276-277)<sup>1</sup>. The different views were: -

1. Homosexual orientation is a disorder that needs God's grace to overcome it.
2. Homosexual genital expression is a barrier to entering the Kingdom of God.
3. Homosexual relationships fall short of the norm but are preferable to promiscuity.
4. Stable monogamous homosexual relationships are morally acceptable.<sup>2</sup>

This essay will examine the ethics involved in this controversy as it relates to the ordination of ministers and church unity.

## ***Ethical Considerations***

The debate on the ordination of homosexuals has similarities to the debate on the ordination of women. Whereas the ordination of women was portrayed as a matter of church order, ordination of homosexuals is a matter of morality. The occurrence of same sex attraction in itself is not seen as a moral issue, but what one does about it. Many in the church see a person living in a homosexual relationship as living in sin and therefore not an acceptable candidate for ordination. But Scripture teaches that "whatever does not come from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23b) which implies that sin is not essentially a condition of disobedience to moral laws, but a condition of broken relationship with God which results in lawlessness (1 Jn 3:4).

William Schweiker calls sexuality a moral space where everyone, whatever their sexual orientation, lives out their moral freedom responsibly (Schweiker, 2008, p. 574). Lisa Cahill, in discussing gender, says gender is not the same thing as biological sex and that gender issues are socially conditioned (Cahill, 2012, pp. 103-105). She concludes that if the morality of gender is culturally conditioned, opposing Christian camps should accept that there will be differing views and be more flexible regarding gender ethics (p. 115).

## ***Relevant Scriptures***

Richard Norris said that for many Christians "The Bible condemns homosexuality" (Norris, 2008, p. 440). They believe that right and wrong are determined by Scripture. Whatever is forbidden in Scripture is forbidden by God (p. 441). This leads to a reluctance to admit that Scripture is open to more than one interpretation and to allow any probing of the meaning of Scripture beyond its "apparent sense" (p. 442).<sup>3</sup> Those advocating that homosexual relationships are condemned by Scripture do not apply similar reasoning to the issue of divorce and remarriage.<sup>4</sup> Norris points out that the Scriptures are not preoccupied with homosexuality

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1 As a result of the inability of the bishops to reach consensus or find a mutually agreeable solution, and due to one diocese ordaining an openly gay bishop, the 2008 Lambeth Conference was boycotted by one third of bishops.

2 The phrase "stable monogamous relationships" will be used in this essay in preference to "marriage" to avoid discussion of another contentious issue.

3 P. Deryn Guest says that the Bible used in this way becomes a powerful weapon by the more powerful heterosexual segments of the church to condemn the minority pro-homosexual group (Guest, 2001, pp. 81-82).

4 Scripture can be taken to teach polygyny, concubinage, sex with slaves, asceticism, sex only for eradicating desire, sex within marriage, but only the latter is supported by conservative Christians

and there are only a few relevant passages (p. 444).

1. Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13 forbids a man "to lie with a male as with a woman." The passage in context instructed Israelites not to follow the religious fertility practices of Egypt and Canaan (Lev 18:3). Some point out that Leviticus also forbids eating shellfish (Lev 11:9-12), which Christians find acceptable. Some argue in reply that the Levitical laws were of civil, ceremonial and moral types, and only the moral laws are still applicable. They argue that Leviticus 18 also prohibits incest which no-one is saying is morally acceptable.
2. Romans 1:18-2:1. James Alison, a gay Catholic theologian, says that early commentators up to and including St Augustine did not see vs. 26 as being about lesbianism so there is no justification for insisting that the meaning is obvious (Alison, 2004, p.2). He says that Catholic Church teaching rejects actualisation of texts, whereby ancient texts are applied in a straightforward way to modern realities. Alison shows that Rom 1:26b-27 cannot be used to judge homosexuals without doing violence to Paul's argument leading up to Rom 2:1 (p. 10). Paul is using a rhetorical device in arguing that those who engage in disgusting pagan temple worship end up doing the same things that the Jewish Christians in Rome are doing, judging others.<sup>5</sup> The frenzied homosexual practices leading to ritual castration in pagan temples do not correspond to modern homosexuality.
3. 1 Cor 6:9-10. Paul says that wrong-doers will not inherit the Kingdom of God and his list of such people includes male prostitutes and sodomites. This passage is inconclusive in regard to whether those in a monogamous homosexual marriage will inherit the Kingdom of God.
4. 1 Tim 1:10 says that those who are godless include fornicators and sodomites. Again there is no decisive application to monogamous homosexual relationships.
5. Genesis 19:1-24 is the story of some men of Sodom who wanted to rape Lot's visitors. This passage does not relate to normal consensual homosexual behaviour (Norris, 2008, p. 444).
6. 1 Samuel 20 speaks of the love between Jonathan and David. Whether this love was altruistic or sexual is not clear, but it seems to speak with approval of same gender attraction and affection.
7. Matthew 8:5-13 where Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion, the Greek word translated "servant" could be translated "a male lover", and Jesus offered no word of condemnation. This translation is disputed and, in any case, inconclusive.

### ***Underlying Causes of Dissension***

The above passages are used to support divergent ethical positions. In addition to Scripture, human reasoning, church tradition, philosophy and culture are involved in ethical judgements. The church has not sufficiently discussed the moral assumptions behind its teaching (Sedwick, 2010, p. 425). Some cultures accept homosexual practices. Many Christians see a natural law<sup>6</sup> at work in the human conscience (Rom 2:14-15), and argue from this natural law to a morality

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(Martin, 2008, pp. 323-324).

- 5 Alison has a humorous aside where he re-words Rom 1:26b-27 to say that women take up abseiling and men give up natural modes of transport and take up paragliding in order to explain how that since the point of Paul's argument is the impermissibility of judging others, the tangential reference to abseiling and paragliding carries no moral weight. Alison concludes that Christians should not read Scripture like Muslims read the Koran, as a book dictated by God. Paul writes to us as a brother, who encourages us to look at each other with mercy and not with niggles like "But the Bible says ..." (Alison, 2004, pp. 11-12).
- 6 Natural law proposes an alternative to relativism and subjectivism believing that there is such a thing as the common good which can only be determined by all the community taking into consideration its complexities and variable fulfilments (Pope, 2012, p. 83).

that is above cultural differences. Has fallen human nature normalised sinful practices in this case, or are they morally neutral but decreed to be right or wrong by a society's code of conduct?

Christians turn to the gospels for ethical guidance in the light of God's grace. Richard Niebuhr's ethics of fitting response<sup>7</sup> enjoins making moral decisions based on what is worthy or fitting of the gospel (Verhey, 2012, p. 51). From this perspective, the question should not be "am I keeping the rules" (as for the conservatives) or "am I being sincere" (as for the liberals) but "what does my relationship signify" as a self-giving commitment reflective of Christ's love (Johnson, 2008, p. 588).

## **Ordination**

Ordination of ministers signifies different things for different churches. For some, ordination is simply recognising God's calling on a pastor. For others, it is the institutional means of appointing its clergy. Some churches view the laying on of hands by a bishop in the apostolic succession as conveying the authority of the church for ministry. The functional and ontological aspects of ordination, which view ordination in terms of a license for office or a supernaturally endowed role, respectively, provide views of ordination from different perspectives, both of which are valid.

For the purposes of this essay, it will be sufficient to see ordination as the church's appointment of its ministers of the gospel in recognition of God's call on their lives. As such, Ordination expresses the unity of the body of Christ in its belief that Christ gives the church its ministers and equips them for service. Those who hold to the apostolic succession view, see ordination as tying the church back to the original teaching of the apostles so that any church in this succession can be viewed as having a legitimate claim to be a Christian church.<sup>8</sup> Protestant churches that see apostolic succession in terms of faithfulness to the apostles' teaching rather than to any historic link, will give emphasis to doctrinal teaching in deciding matters of church unity. Controversy over ordination has repercussions for church unity between and within denominations. A protestant church that ordains practising homosexuals is usually seen as being too liberal by a fundamentalist church.

Scriptural qualifications for ordination are found in 1 Timothy 3: 1-7 and Titus 1: 5- 9. The qualification for a bishop, that he is the husband of only one wife, could be taken to preclude people in homosexual relationships on purely church order grounds. However, few would take these passages in such a literalistic way. Of much greater significance is the need for the candidate to be of good moral character. As mentioned in the introduction, there are a number of different views on the morality of homosexuality and this gives rise to a number of possible stances on ordination.<sup>9</sup>

1. Homosexual behaviour is sinful and therefore practising homosexuals do not qualify to be ordained.
2. Stable monogamous homosexual relationships are not sinful and not a barrier to ordination.
3. Stable monogamous homosexual relationships are preferable to transient or promiscuous relationships and should be encouraged by the church. Although this position might be taken with the laity, ordination should not be allowed at this time for reasons of church unity.
4. Similar to the previous item except allowing ordination in consenting churches for

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7 Preston thinks "the ethic of response is not shackled by the natural law argument which concludes that homosexuality is contrary to nature" (Preston, 2007, p. 101).

8 Churches claiming episcopal apostolic succession include the Catholic, Orthodox and, to some extent, Anglican. A minister ordained in one such church usually does not have to be ordained again when transferring to another denomination which has a claim to apostolic succession.

9 The list of possible positions was suggested by Rev Dr Keith Joseph in tutorials for the CSU Theological Ethics course in October, 2013.

reasons of fairness to homosexuals.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no solution that will satisfy all parties and arguments can be mounted against any of the above positions.

### ***Issues of authority and unity in the church***

Differences of opinion are not just between denominations or between diocese within a denomination, they also occur between and within church congregations and between clergy and laity<sup>11</sup>. When the Uniting Church of Australia Assembly voted to allow its churches to decide if they wanted a homosexual minister, some of its more fundamentalist members left to go to other churches. It must be remembered that in the lifetime of many of church members, homosexual practice has changed from being a crime to being acceptable in Australian society. This might have the appearance to many older Christians that Australian society is becoming less Christian and the church needs to provide moral leadership. The church has long taught its members the moral superiority of Christianity and that Christians should not follow the ways of the world.

Theological liberals in the 1970's made gay ordination an issue by focusing on the rights of gay individuals rather than on the morality of gay relationships, but ordination is a privilege and not a right. Some churches have welcomed gay individuals but refused them leadership positions. Hence the church has implicitly accepted gay orientation as a given. It is a harsh morality that accepts gay sexual orientation but condemns the sexual expression of love that flows from it. The question of ordination should follow the prior question of whether there is a place for practising homosexuals in Christian congregations (Johnson, 2008, pp. 583-583).

Christopher Morse completes Norris's argument<sup>12</sup> by suggesting that if gay Christians are thankful for the salvation they have in Christ, should not the rest of the church also be thankful for them? The church's common prayer of thanksgiving and Eucharistic fellowship are more important than moral codes, which are trumped by the gospel in any case, whether we find gay behaviour nice or not is of little consequence (Morse, 2008, p. 553).

When in 2004 the New Hampshire Anglican Diocese wanted to elect as bishop, Gene Robinson, who was in an openly gay relationship, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wanted Robinson to withdraw his nomination for the sake of unity in the Anglican Communion. Rowan Williams later commented in an interview, that Gene Robinson was not invited to the 2008 Lambeth conference "in accordance with the direct counsel of the wider communion." He said, "That felt like both an inevitable thing, to honour commitments we had declared together, and also a very, very hard and un-kingdom-like thing to be doing" (Dr Williams speaks of his "regrets", 2012, p. 7). Should Christians behave in an "un-kingdom-like" way because of pressure from church leaders? This raises the issue of church politics. Was this an abuse of power by those with the numbers? Is it right to use church unity to progress a view point? On the other hand, were the proponents of gay ordination placing their moral agenda above church unity?

When churches subordinate the importance of unity to other more pressing matters, they do so at the cost of the credibility of their witness to the gospel. It is a denial of the gospel to refuse fellowship with Christians who affirm the historic Christian creeds, but who hold in good faith, less important doctrinal or ethical beliefs that they reasonably found on Scripture, but are different from yours. The issue of unity is of much more importance than Christians, including those in positions of authority<sup>13</sup> in the church, are willing to acknowledge. Unity

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10 Further to footnote 9, the Rev Dr Keith Joseph said the Anglican Church in England used a "fly-in Bishop" arrangement to deal with concerns over the ordination of women to the bishopric by dissenting churches. This might be difficult in practice but could be used in the event of ordination of a homosexual bishop living in a monogamous relationship.

11 E.g. see <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/5/17/presbyterians-divided-same-sex-marriage/>

12 Norris died before completing his "Notes" essay, so Morse seeks to complete his argument.

13 Authority in the church is a large topic in itself and is not discussed here. See the 2007 NCC report "Authority of the Church in the World" for a good overview.

stands alongside the gospel in doctrinal priority.<sup>14</sup> Valuing church unity means to value other people as upheld by Jesus' love commandment.<sup>15</sup>

The way the ecumenical movement seeks to deal with doctrinal differences between churches is to take a no compromise<sup>16</sup> stand and to do the hard work of examining alternative views to find the truth.<sup>17</sup> Ecumenism does not require institutional unity, or agreement on every doctrine or practice of the church, but it encourages churches to relate to one another as people united in Christ.

### **A Way Forward**

Christians and, especially, church leaders should give priority "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3) with other denominations, diocese, and churches. The issue of gay ordination, whilst admittedly being a source of contention in the church, is of minor importance compared to church unity. The appeal to church unity by conservatives as a reason to disallow gay ordination is not reasonable since they are the one's threatening to withdraw fellowship on a peripheral issue. The interests of church unity requires both conservative and liberal/progressive Christians to back down from their adversarial positions and give emphasis to the basic teaching of Christianity that salvation is a work of God in Christ and that obedience to a moral code is insufficient to achieve salvation. The debate over gay ordination within the church seeks to apply moral laws within the church. Churches should be free to decide on a case by case basis whether an individual would be a good leader in the church without resorting to blanket rules of morality which negate the fact that Christians are indwelt by the spirit of Christ and can call upon God for guidance. After all, ordination itself is (among other things) the church's confirmation of God's call to ministry.

John Perry suggested that a way forward is to study the analogy of gentiles with homosexuals (Perry, 2010, p. 321). He likens the relinquishment of the Jewish moral code in the case of gentiles (Acts 15) to changing attitudes to the morality of homosexual expression. Perry says that in the 1950's the homosexual community was not interested in marriage or adopting children but there has been a change of thinking within the homosexual community just as there has been in the heterosexual community (p. 322). Perry concedes that the argument that morality has changed does not negate the understanding that exploitative homosexuality was wrong in Paul's time and is still wrong today (p. 345). However, changing community moral standards cannot be ignored. There is a tendency towards conservatism in the majority of members of the Christian church in Australia. The pace of change in community attitudes has been resisted in the church on many issues including ordination of women, ordination of divorced and re-married people, styles of worship, changes to liturgy, and ordination of homosexuals. Historically, the church's involvement in the overthrow of slavery did not occur in one generation and was resisted at the time by many Christians.<sup>18</sup> It may well be that ordination of homosexuals will not find general acceptance in the church in this generation due to deeply held negative attitudes, but this may well change in the future. Dale Martin commented that the debate is not about the authority of Scripture or what Scripture says, but a generational issue that will pass in time (Martin, 2008p. 526).

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14 The large number of denominations in the world and the low interest in them having communion together, is a testimony to the low value given to church unity.

15 Those who reject a commitment to ecumenism and freely criticise Christians who hold contrary opinions defend their actions by saying that to love others might mean treating them as sinners in need of repentance. I see this as spiritual pride.

16 The ecumenical movement is often criticised for compromising doctrinal truths for the sake of unity. However, from the ecumenical movement's point of view, the aim is to work together to find truth. This might mean the parties in dialogue will have to lay aside some doctrinal positions. This "no compromise" commitment to truth is viewed as compromise by opponents.

17 The Catholic and Lutheran churches were able to issue a joint statement on Justification by Faith in the 1990's, one of the issues of contention in Luther's split with Rome. It only took 500 years.

18 The Anglican evangelist, Rev. George Whitfield, owned slaves in the USA where he lobbied the state parliament to allow slavery on Biblical grounds.

## **Conclusion**

Disagreement is inevitable on this issue and any solution will need to be handled sensitively and with pastoral concern for all involved. The argument from church unity is only valid if it is used to say that no matter what your church/diocese/denomination's view, there will be no break in communion. In allowing gay ordination in some places, the message the church sends to the world would be of the over-riding importance of the gospel and the church's united commitment to Christ.

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