

## 2021 Working notes on sexuality session

I want to begin by saying thanks to all of you for coming along – I realise that as we gather there will be a wide variety of feelings we have about this evening. There may be some of us feeling anxious, there will be some of us who feel it's a positive thing that we are beginning to open up this conversation.

I think one of the first things I want to say at the start of this evening is an acknowledgement that this is just one evening in what we realise needs to be a long conversation... we are not going to be able to deal with this topic in one evening. And yet we also share, as a Diaconate and Ministry Team, a sense that this is a conversation which needs to be had, we don't just want to open up the box for one evening and then close it up again.

For those of who are wondering about the format of this evening, there will be quite a lot of teaching from me, from the front... and also some discussion... the teaching I want to share is lengthy, but it's a reflection of the complexity of this issue.

So... there are three elements of this conversation this evening... I want to begin by asking us to consider some grounding principles which I think are important, some principles which are to do with how we need to have this conversation, how we need to relate to one another.

That will part one of our evening. Part three will be a reflection on some passages from Scripture, some key passages which we often turn to when we're discussing this issue. But before we look at the bible, I want us to do some thinking about how we read Scripture, the sense in which we understand it to be authoritative, and also to talk how Scripture is a key source to guide us in our conversation and how it relates to other sources.

So to begin... **how are we going to have this conversation?**

There are a number of things I want to say at the outset, a number of things which I want to say as your pastor, as minister, almost by way of a plea to all of us about how I hope we can open up issue in the most healthy way possible.

- a. Let's remember, first and foremost, that we are here this evening **not to debate an issue but to have a conversation about people...** if there is one thing which I hope we can all agree on, it's that every person is created by God, made in his image, loved by Him, every person is a person for whom Jesus has come, a person Jesus wants to be in relationship with him. it is all. I hope and pray we can all approach this with a mindset that this is not about arguing over theology, it's about people... and often people whose experience will have been one of pain and rejection and marginalisation, either from family or from wider society, and from the church. And can we also please remember that for some of us in this room, the issue will be deeply personal, in ways that we may not even be aware of... that a conversation about people who experience same-sex attraction is going to a conversation about someone's son or daughter, someone's brother or sister, someone's friend, it may even be a conversation about some of us here and who we experience ourselves to

be and who we feel God has made us to be... you don't know where other people are at, what they're going through... And so because of us that...

- b. **Let's not rush to judgements and conclusions.** I am reminded of these words from James: **'My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: L** Let's try, first of all, to understand that we will all be coming to this issue from different places and different perspectives because of often different experiences we've had and people we've known. And let's try not to mis-characterise each other and each other's motivations, let's try to give each other the benefit of the doubt... It seems to me that this is one of the challenges we often face when this issue is debated. If we feel that someone is approaching this issue from what we could call the conservative or traditional perspective, it's all too easy for those who think differently to characterise them as just being narrow, as being judgemental or not open to new thinking... and in the same way, if someone holds a position which is affirming of same-sex relationships, it's all too easy for others to write them off as liberal, as heretics, as people who don't take sin seriously. These are judgements of each other don't make it easy to have a conversation.

Let's start from the assumption that every person here is here because they love God, they love people, they love the Bible and are trying to work out what faith and trust in God and love for people looks like with regard to this issue. And let's also recognise that it is but one of a number of issues on which Christians have different perspectives... some Christians believe God plans everything and some believe he has ordered creation in such a way as to give creatures free will... some Christians are pacifists and others believe that wars may be just... some believe that once you're saved you're always saved and others believe it's possible to lose your faith... some believe that the bread and wine at communion is transformed into the body and blood of Christ and others say it's just mere symbols. And everyone arrives at these positions through reading Scripture differently, because Scripture does not always speak with clarity on such matters. And that leads me on to my next point:

- c. **Let's keep this in perspective...** it seems to be that another of the challenges we face in situations like this is how to have the debate without it becoming all-encompassing. We have somehow made someone's stance on same-sex relationships the issue of whether they're in or out, bible-believing or liberal... we have afforded this issue a prominence which we don't attach to almost any other one.

As I think about this issue, I often find myself thinking back to some words we find in Ezekiel. I find this verse especially apt because it refers to Sodom... Sodom is of course thought of as a place which is a byword for sexual sin, hence the reason why we even speak of sodomy. And yet what does Ezekiel say? **'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.'** **Ezekiel 16:49** I think we need to pay attention to this, to recognise that yes, the bible does speak of the importance of sexual purity, of not sinning against our bodies which are temples of the Holy Spirit. But the bible also speaks of the dangers of wealth, of greed, of selfishness... of gossip... would we consider throwing someone out of church if they

turned up one Sunday in a Ferrari? Probably not, but I think Jesus would find that problematic. What are the behaviours that really divide churches? Often, they're not to do with sex, they're do with selfishness, immaturity, people throwing their weight around or pursuing agendas of their own. And finally...

- d. **Let's be willing to examine ourselves...** and by this I am referring to both self-examination both on a personal level and as a church. I think it's important that we approach this issue not by considering what's going on out there, in the world, but by looking first of all at ourselves. We need to be honest about our own fears, our own phobias, including homophobia. We need to be honest about our prejudices or hypocrisy, ways in which we have imposed standards on some people which we wouldn't expect of ourselves, judged the behaviour of some and turned a blind eye to that of others. And we also need to acknowledge the hurt and pain, sometimes very deep pain and anguish, caused to those who have been excluded or marginalised.

I realise that all took a long time, that there was a lot of ground which we covered there, but it's important to name these issues at the start of the evening.

As I said earlier, we are going to spend time looking at some key passages, but there is another question we need to consider before we get to this, all to do with:

### **What guides our debate?**

Or, to put it another way, what are the authoritative voices which can speak into this conversation?

One of the things we agree on as Baptists, it's one of the distinctives of our ecclesiology, is that we affirm quite explicitly the headship of Jesus.

Baptists, historically, have not been people who are predisposed to statements of theology or belief, one of the few statements we've issued has been the **Declaration of Principle** which begins by saying this:

### **The Basis of the Baptist Union is...**

**That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.**

And, of course, we have that reference there to Scripture. We understand that reflection on Scripture, aided by the Holy Spirit, is an absolutely key way that we hear from God, a crucial part of the process for any group of believers who are seeking to discern the mind of Christ.

But we need to acknowledge that there are certain principles we need to bear in mind when reading the bible, on this matter of same sex relationships and on other issues.

**Firstly, the bible is a text unlike any other, to fully understand it and to have it speak to us requires an openness to God and the Spirit** and the new thing he might want to say to us.

Two years ago, in the autumn of 2019, you might recall that we spent some time thinking about how to read the Bible, back then I shared this quote from the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, I think it's worth sharing again:

**'the Bible is concerned with modes of knowledge that are relational, covenantal, and interactional, believing that knowledge should not dominate but should serve to liberate... "New truth" comes where imagination challenges, where spirit blows against letter (2 Cor 3:6), and where yielding replaces control.'**

**Walter Brueggemann, *The Book that Breathes New Life***

Sometimes we will read the Bible and find ourselves corrected, rebuked, summoned to change our behaviour by reining in what we're doing, at other times we will hear in Scripture a voice of liberation.

**Secondly, the bible is an unfolding narrative.** It is a story with many twists and turns, the story of a God of liberation takes the people of Israel under his wings and makes covenant with them, who asks them to live in obedience to a law which often seems demanding but which is based on the need for holiness that reflects God's holiness and the need for his people to be set apart from others.

Those people go on a journey from being ruled by judges to being ruled by kings, to defeating other nations as they win the land but then being defeated and sent in to exile. The climax of the story is the coming of Jesus in whom we see God revealed most fully, he announces a kingdom, a new rule of God which is lived out now in the church, a movement which breaks down barriers and welcomes Gentiles in a way which is a huge disruption and change from the old order of Judaism.

**Thirdly, there are grand themes in this story which we need to hold in tension.** As I said a moment ago, it seems to me you have a holiness arc which runs through Scripture, an emphasis on the need for the people of God to be distinctive and set apart, not to live as other nations do. And you also have a welcome arc... categories of people who were not welcome among God's people are welcomed by the church.

The Jesus we read of in the Gospels is a friend of sinners. He touches lepers, he announces forgiveness to sinful women and tax collectors. And in all of this his holiness is not diminished... a key part of our testimony of Jesus is that he is the only sinless person who ever lived... even though he hung out with lots of people considered dodgy by his contemporaries!

The church welcomes eunuchs and gentiles, allows gentiles and women to lead. And yet the holiness arc does not disappear, it's still there... Jesus commands his disciples to be salt and light and warns of the danger of them losing their saltiness. When Peter writes to the early church he says this:

**But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**

**1 Peter 2:9**

His language here is striking in so far as it echoes Exodus 19 language, the covenant at Sinai...

However, **fourthly, we also need to recognise that the Bible is a text written from a time long before our own by people very different to us.** That doesn't mean that it's not authoritative, but it does mean that we need to read it in a way which is sensitive to that distance between then and now, it also means we sometimes need to read between the lines, to discern what the intention of logic of a writer might have been, and also to balance individual texts against the grand themes.

We know there are texts in the bible which say women shouldn't preach in churches, but we ordain women as Baptists and women preach in SBC. Why? Well, to cut a very long story short, we make a distinction between particular commands given by a Paul to Timothy, to do with a church in Ephesus where some women seem to have been causing trouble, and a wider theme we see in the New Testament. In Christ there is neither male and female, as we read in Galatians 3! And in Romans we read of women exercising apostolic authority.

Another example worth mentioning in this regard is slavery. This is a point which is made very well by the American scholar James Brownson. He says this:

**'Not everything that the biblical writers assume or take for granted is to be considered normative for Christians today, particularly when these assumptions are based on culturally variable norms that Scripture itself engages in a variety of ways. For example, the church of the nineteenth century had to reread the biblical texts on slavery in a more deep and penetrating way. Even the biblical writers, particularly in the New Testament, had simply assumed, without question, that the institution of slavery existed and would continue to exist.'**

**James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality***

We might want to reflect further on what the implications of this for same-sex relationships – Scripture talks about and prohibits homosexual acts, it does not speak of homosexual orientation. Those who lived in the ancient era would not have been familiar with our concept of sexual orientation, nor would they have been familiar with the concept of stable, faithful and committed same-sex relationships.

We need to acknowledge this and acknowledge that all the time the culture we live in is changing, and that will inevitably impact on how we read Scripture. Ten years ago, if I had come to you and said I am going to preach a sermon about 2 Samuel 11, David's adultery with Bathsheba, and I'm going to talk about it in terms of Bathsheba's 'me too' moment you might have wondered what I was talking about. Now you wouldn't, because we know of the stories and events which have alerted us to the exploitation of women, their abuse at the hands of powerful men, that cause us to read the story differently.

And this leads me on to saying just a few things about other sources of authority, besides Scripture.

I can still remember one of my first lectures at College when we were introduced to these four sources of authority when we do theology:

- **Scripture**
- **Tradition**
- **Experience**
- **Reason**

Obviously, we've already spoken about scripture at length but we need to recognise the place of the other three in our conversation. With regard to:

- Tradition – we need to be mindful of 2,000 years of history of the church when the orthodox teaching of the church has been that marriage between a man and a woman has been God's primary template for the expression of sexuality. Of course, tradition sometimes gives way to change... for a long time women were not ordained, to pick up on a previous example we spoke of and some of us would want to call our attention, and rightly so, to ways in which patriarchy and other voices of power shaped that tradition. But still we have to recognise this understanding of marriage as being integral to the church's tradition.
- Experience – we do live in a world which is more open, more tolerant and that has rightly shaped our thinking. More of us now will have friends, family members who will be open about their sexuality, we will have journeyed with them, heard stories of their pain and rejection, seen them model virtues of love and care and faithfulness in the lives they build together.
- Reason – how do we apply reason to this debate? I find myself reminded of some words I read recently by the American writer David Gushee:

**'In this case, the unassimilable reality is that a small but persistent percentage of the human population feels no attraction to members of the opposite sex. They are drawn to members of the same sex. I know that sexual orientation is more complicated than this in many instances, but this is the baseline case that must first be addressed.**

**Evangelicals [in the United States] were unable to face this fact. They tried an immense number of evasions of reality. Same-sex attraction was a delusion. It was temporary. It was demon possession. It was wilful. It was changeable...'**

**David Gushee, *After Evangelicalism***

I realise we've already covered a lot of ground before we've even looked at some bible passages but it is really important that we address these background issues before we do so. We're going to look at Scripture in more detail in just a moment, but before we do **let's take a break.**

*As we do, why don't you turn to the people next to you and have a quick conversation with them about what we've shared so far – how do you feel about this? Is there anything you've heard which is disconcerting, is there anything which you've found helpful.*

**Turning to Scripture**

So... now we come to the final part of our evening. What I'd like to do now is look at some of the passages which are most commonly cited by Christians in this debate about same sex relationships, we'll talk about them and about how people with different perspectives interpret them. We'll look at readings from the beginning of Genesis and also some verses found in Romans 1.

So... first of all Genesis 1 and 2, two chapters which provide alternative accounts of creation, each with different emphases as they speak of the creation of people.

Let's look first at all at **Genesis 1:26-31**.

These are words with which I'm sure many of us will be familiar and they are probably the verses most commonly cited by those who argue for a traditional understanding of marriage and sexuality. And we need to pay careful attention to what we read here, these are verses which affirm an understanding that men and women complement each other... and to make clear, what I'm referring to here is complement and not compliment, this is about men and women completing each other, not saying nice things to each other! 😊

It's going without saying that there are marked differences between men and women... even if we do want to push back on stereotypical and old-fashioned notions of what it is to be masculine and feminine, we can't deny this... when I think of this passage it reminds me of my favourite one liner by Groucho Marx – 'One of my parents was a man and the other was a woman, it's no wonder I'm so messed up!'

But how can we explain this difference? Genesis 1 tells us that it's not because men and women are from different places, it's not that men are from Mars and women from Venus to quote the name of a book that was popular a few years ago. Actually, it's because they come from the same place.

One of the most telling lines in these verses is that found in verse 27: '... in the image of God he created them.'

Why would God create two people to reflect his own image?

I wonder if one of the things we learn from this passage is that God contains within his heart so much goodness, so much creativity, so much of a desire to give, so much of a capacity to give love and receive love, that one type of person is not enough to truly reflect who he is.

A man on his own is not simply not enough to bear the image of God. A woman on her own is not enough to bear the image of God.

But what might happen when a man and woman come together? When that occurs the way in which their differences, their respective strengths, complement each other brings a sense of completeness, something more than the sum of their parts and in that we see something of God revealed. And traditionalists who point to this text will point to the other differences between men and women which are a means by which each brings the best out of the other. And they will also point out to the obvious differences between male and female anatomy and say that this is another example of male and female completing each other.

It's an important passage and one which I think we need to pay careful attention to, in terms of the sexuality debate but also when considering how men and women relate to each other in general and in church. Both male and female are created in God's image and there is nothing to say one is more or less in God's image. So we might want to reflect on how churches where only men preach or only men lead are fully reflecting the image of God. I realise this isn't what we here to talk about this evening, but it's an important point nonetheless.

However, back to the matter in hand. Here we have Genesis 1, from which traditionalists argue for an understanding of sexuality that affirms the primacy of heterosexual marriage. But is this understanding, which emphasises the importance of difference between the sexes, the only one?

Is it possible that there is another way, that similarity between people might be a basis for relating to one another? This is one of the arguments put forward by those who call upon the church to affirm same-sex relationships and one of the texts they call upon is the creation account found in Genesis 2.

Let's turn now to... **Genesis 2:18-25.**

Here we have another version of the creation of male and female, but there are different emphases within it. It's interesting to note that there isn't a reference made to pro-creation but rather to companionship, Eve is created by God in response to Adam's loneliness. It's worth reflecting for a moment on what some see as one of the most telling details in this story, Adam's response when he sees Eve. Do you remember what he says in **verse 23**?

**The man said,  
 "This is now bone of my bones  
 and flesh of my flesh;  
 she shall be called 'woman,'  
 for she was taken out of man. "**

Remember back to what we said about Genesis 1, where one of the conclusions many people draw from the text is that Adam and Eve complete each other, or complement each other, because they are different. But here in Genesis 2 Adam says something different. He doesn't look at Eve and say, 'You're different to me and therefore my ideal companion!' Instead he speaks of her as 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.'

In other words, he says 'You're the same as me!' And this is the basis for the relationship, that he feels a bond with Eve that he can't have with any other creature. This is a point which is made by one writer who argues for an affirming stance on same-sex relationships:

**'The primary movement in the text is not from unity to differentiation, but from the isolation of an individual to the deep blessing of shared kinship and community. Of course, the story envisions marriage as the most basic form of this community, and it assumes that marriage is constituted by a husband and wife. But the text doesn't really explore gender differences at all, it places the emphasis on the value of shared human experience between the man and the woman.'**



**James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality***

This is just one quote, but a key one from the argument which Brownson makes in his book – if the basis for God’s provision of a companion to Adam is to give him someone with whom he can form this kinship bond, then could it be that a union of two people, one marked by the same covenantal commitments as marriage, might be one to which churches could give their blessing?

That’s a very condensed version of two different interpretations which are made of these Genesis texts... a lot depends on what you emphasise, is it difference or kinship?

You might want to **take a moment to speak to the person next to you about what resonates most with you?**

Time has almost gone, but there is just one more passage I’d like us to consider, the one which, in addition to the early chapters of Genesis, is most commonly cited in this debate, and that’s **Romans 1**, specifically the second half of the chapter, from verse 18 onwards. This section begins with Paul writing about how God’s wrath is being revealed against humanity because of their rejection of him. He talks about how people have wilfully rejected God, in spite of their knowing him, and how they are now reaping the consequences of their actions. In the words of verse 25, ‘They exchanged the truth of God for a lie.’

We take up the reading in verse 26. **Read Romans 1:26-32.**

You can see why this is a text which is often cited by those who want to affirm a traditional understanding of marriage and human sexuality. It couldn’t read like a more emphatic pronouncement on this issue of same sex relationships. The take on this passage of some traditional commentators will be that while Paul is writing here about all kinds of sin, how the Fall impacts humanity in so many ways, he cites the particular example of homosexuality because it is the perfect illustration of a fall away from what seems like a natural pattern and design. This is what one writer says:

**When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator’s design. Thus, Paul’s choice of homosexuality as an illustration of human depravity is not merely random: it serves his rhetorical purposes by providing a vivid image of humanity’s primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the Creator.**

**Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament***

It’s worth noting that a lot of the debate around this passage hinges on what we understand by the word unnatural, which in the Greek is actually two words, ‘para physis.’

There are opposing views on how to interpret this word. For some the meaning is what it says at face value, others argue for a more nuanced meaning. They will suggest that what Paul is talking about here is what would have been considered natural by the cultural expectations of his day, they will say, as we mentioned earlier, that Paul would not have

seen a distinction between homosexual behaviour and orientation. This is how two New Testament scholars make this point:

**‘The idea of having a sexual orientation toward people of a same sex was unknown because any notion of sexual orientation was unknown. But that doesn’t mean there wasn’t homoerotic sex going on. Temple prostitution was a common place for that. In the Roman world, the world of Paul, the sexual abuse of boys, slaves and freedmen was widespread and accepted.’**

**Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh, *Romans Disarmed***

So this is the argument which will be made by affirming writers about Romans 1. They will make a number of points. They will say that:

- What Paul is arguing against here are sexual relationships which we would recognise today as abusive and wrong, invariably relationships which had a power distortion, older men taking advantage of young men or boys, masters taking advantage of slaves. They will say that Paul does imagine the sort of monogamous, faithful, loving and committed gay relationships we know of today.
- They will also argue that Romans 1 is an attack not just on sin but on the particular excesses of the Roman Empire, perhaps even Nero’s imperial household, and that it’s written in a particular style, it’s a typical Jewish rant against pagan debauchery. Think about that list near the end... verses 29 to 31, one sin and accusation heaped up on another...does that really describe your gay neighbours who have lived together for years?
- And they will also point out that at the end of Romans 1 Paul is preparing us for something of a sucker punch... he lists all these terrible things pagans do, and then at the start of chapter 2 he says, ‘you have no excuse passing judgement on someone else because you do the same things.’ This is part of a section of writing which extends all the way through to chapter 3 and eventually concludes with that famous statement about all having sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So we need to proceed with caution if we’re thinking we can use this as a ‘clobber text,’ ultimately it clobbers us all.

Now, it also needs to be said that traditionalists have their arguments to counter some of this:

They will argue that the plain reading of a text, unnatural means contrary to nature, is likely to be the most plausible. They will also point out that Paul doesn’t just refer to relationships between men and other men which often seem to have been abusive but also between women and women, they will say female same-sex relationships of this time were not characterised by the same sort of abuses that there were with men.

The back and forth of these arguments is an illustration of how the literature around this debate often reads... we are faced with contrary and opposing perspectives and are trying to find our way through them.

This is a debate with many voices, many claims and counter-claims, to discern through whom God is speaking, how the Spirit is at work, is immensely challenging.

As I was thinking again about these passages, I found my mind going back to an exercise which we used to do on a regular basis when I was at college. We had to take part in what was called sermon workshop, we were given a passage and asked to consider how we'd preach on it and the first part of the exercise was to look at commentaries and do the work of reading into the background, the Greek or Hebrew and so forth. That exercise was referred to as exegesis, the goal was to find out what the passage really meant, the idea being that once we found out what it really meant we could then preach on it.

I get the theory, but the more I look back on that exercise I wonder how plausible it really was, the idea that we can step back from a passage and discern the real meaning, that we can be completely neutral readers of it, that there is just one meaning of a passage to discover. I don't think we should read the bible that way, we need to acknowledge we all read with our own agendas, experiences, cultures and so forth. And, also, as we read and think about this particular topic we need to do so recognising that it's not a topic we're talking about, it's people. It's not about deciding on a viewpoint, it's deciding what our welcome will look like.

**Questions?**