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The St Andrew's Day Statement

An Examination of the Theological Principles Affecting the Homosexuality Debate

Faced with practical questions which arouse strong and conflicting passions, the church has only one recourse: to find in the Gospel a starting-point of common faith from which those who differ can agree to proceed in their discussions. Such a question now before the Church of England is how we should respond to those, including clergy, seeking to live in quasi-marital relations with a partner of the same sex. The purpose of the following statement is to provide some definition of the theological ground upon which the issue should be addressed and from which any fruitful discussion between those who disagree may proceed.

By defining its fundamental agreements more clearly, the church may lighten the weight which is at present laid upon a practical question not without importance in its own right but in danger of being over-freighted with symbolic resonances. This in turn may create a context for principled pastoral care which is more responsive to particular individual circumstances and less to political meanings that can be read into them. That the issue should have become so highly dramatised calls for repentance on the part of all members of the church. It suggests that the Gospel has not been directing the acts, words and thoughts of Christians on this subject.

To emphasise its purpose the statement is in two parts. the first an affirmation of credal principles, the second an application of these principles to the question of homosexuality as it presents itself to the church today. It is not intended to cover every issue that must be considered in this context, and nothing should be inferred from what the statement does not say. If its assertions prove susceptible of being accommodated within more than one interpretation of present disputes, that will be an advantage, since it hopes to include all who do not intend a decisive break with orthodox Christianity. Of those who, nevertheless, find that they cannot agree, it is asked only that they should be precise about their disagreements, so that the extent of common ground available to the church may become clear.

PRINCIPLES

I

Jesus Christ is the one Word of God. He came in human flesh, died for our sins and was raised for our justification. In the flesh he lived for us a life of obedience to the will of God; on the cross he bore God's judgement on our sin; and in his resurrection our human nature was made new. In him we know both God and human nature as they truly are. In his life, death and resurrection we are adopted as children of God and called to follow in the way of the cross. His promise and his call are for every human being: that we should trust in him, abandon every self-justification, and rejoice in the good news of our redemption.

II

The Spirit of Jesus Christ bears witness to the Gospel in Holy Scripture and in the ministry of the people of God. He directs us in the task of understanding all human life and experience through the Scriptures. And so, guided by the Spirit of God to interpret the times, the church proclaims the Word of God to the needs of each new age, and declares Christ's redeeming power and forgiveness in mutual encouragement and exhortation to holiness.

III

The Father of Jesus Christ restores broken creation in him. For he himself is its fulfilment: in him the church learns by its life and witness to attest to the goodness and hope of creation. The Spirit gives us strength and confidence to live as men and women within the created order, finding peace and reconciliation and awaiting the final revelation of the children of God.

APPLICATION

I

"In him" – and in him alone – "we know both God and human nature as they truly are"; and so in him alone we know ourselves as we truly are. There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality in Christ. We must be on guard, therefore, against constructing any other ground for our identities than the redeemed humanity given us in him. Those who understand themselves as homosexuals, no more and no less than those who do not, are liable to false understandings based on personal or family histories, emotional dispositions, social settings, and solidarities formed by common experiences or ambitions. Our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race or nationality. At the deepest ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as "a" homosexual or "a"

heterosexual; there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation.

“Adopted as children of God and called to follow in the way of the cross”, we all are summoned to various forms of self-denial. The struggle against disordered desires, or the misdirection of innocent desires, is part of every Christian’s life, consciously undertaken in baptism. In any individual case, the form which this struggle takes may be determined by circumstances (wealth or poverty, illness or health, educational success or failure). Often these are not open to choice, but are given to us as a situation in which we are to live faithfully. We are not promised that the struggle will be quickly and triumphantly resolved, nor even that it will be successful at every point along the way; only that it will be crowned at last by a character formed through patience to be like Christ’s.

II

The interpretation of homosexual emotion and behaviour is a Christian “task”, still inadequately addressed. “Guided by God’s Spirit”, the church must be open to empirical observation and governed by the authority of the apostolic testimony. According to this testimony the rebellion of humankind against God darkens our mind and subverts our understanding of God and creation (Acts 26.18; Rom. 1.19-32; Eph. 4.17-19). For the biblical writers the phenomena of homosexual behaviour are not addressed solely as wilfully perverse acts but in generalised terms, and are located within the broader context of human idolatry (Rom. 1.26-27 with 1.19-32; 1 Cor. 6.9-10 with 6.12-20).

Many competing interpretations of the phenomena can be found in contemporary discussion, none of them with an unchallengeable basis in scientific data. The church has no need to espouse any one theory, but may learn from many. To every theory, however, it must put the question whether it is adequate to the understanding of human nature and its redemption that the Gospel proclaims. Theories which fail this test can only imprison the imagination by foreclosing the recognition of emotional variety and development. To “interpret the times” in the midst of this theoretical confusion, the church must avoid being lulled by the vague idea that there is a transparent and necessary progress of thought working itself out in history, with which it has only somehow to keep abreast. It must search for conceptual and theological clarification. Without this there are dangers in a wide-ranging programme of discussions which, with insufficient support from the church’s teaching, may serve merely to amplify the Babel of confused tongues.

The primary pastoral task of the church in relation to all its members,

whatever their self-understanding and mode of life, is to re-affirm the good news of salvation in Christ, forgiveness of sins, transformation of life and incorporation into the holy fellowship of the church. In addressing those who understand themselves as homosexual, the church does not cease to speak as the bearer of this good news. It assists all its members to a life of faithful witness in chastity and holiness, recognising two forms or vocations in which that life can be lived: marriage and singleness (Gen. 2.24; Matt. 19.4-6; I Cor.7 *passim*). There is no place for the church to confer legitimacy upon alternatives to these. Pastoral care, however, needs a certain flexibility, taking note of the circumstances which make each individual case different from every other, and discerning ways in which the Gospel touches people in different situations. The church, then, will give constant encouragement in following Christ not only to those who conform to one of these two vocations, but to all who seriously intend discipleship in fellowship with the body of the church. It is in this sense that the Bishops' Statement (*Issues in Human Sexuality*, 1991) is to be understood when it speaks of "respecting the integrity" (cf. 5.21) of those who conscientiously dissent from the biblical teaching as the church understands it. While this teaching applies to all – for the priesthood of believers consecrates all Christians to a life of holiness – the Bishops have Scripture on their side in arguing that special considerations affect the behaviour of the clergy, who have a particular commission to expound and exemplify the teachings of the church (cf. 1 Tim. 3.1-13; 4.12-13; 5.19-20; Tit. 1.5-9; Jas. 3.1; 2 Pet. 2.2).

III

The "fulfilment" of all creation is found in Christ (Eph. 1.23; Col. 1.15-19). Our own fulfilment, therefore, is not merely a private one but a communal, even a cosmic one. Both marriage and singleness in their different ways point forward to this fulfilment in the fellowship of God with his redeemed creation. In neither vocation, then, does fulfilment require or allow the exercise of every power or the satisfaction of every desire that any individual may reasonably have: a life may be fulfilled without occasion to employ the power of sexual expression, just as it may without occasion to exploit the potential for education, parenthood or mobility.

Both vocations in their different ways give equal expression to the blessing of human friendship, which is sanctified by Christ who calls us his friends (John 15.13-15; cf. Isa. 41.8) and elevated in him to become the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13.14). Every aspect of our common life in Christ, friendship included, has a properly exploratory character: understanding our humanity in him, we are freed from human constructs to search out and discover the richness of creation that is opened to us by God's redeeming work. This search finds its fulfilment as

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it is directed by the hope for the final appearing of Jesus, the Son obedient to the Father who will put all things in subjection to him.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

TITUS 2.11-15

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