

## HOW MANY SEXUALITIES?: NORMS AND DIVERSITY IN ETHICS AND PASTORAL CARE<sup>1</sup>

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I vividly remember the conversation with Claire (a pseudonym) in my vestry. She was a vivacious and professionally successful woman who had dramatically come to faith in a church service a number of years before as an undergraduate. She had grown quickly as a Christian and, after graduating, went overseas with an evangelical mission agency. It was whilst abroad that she first began to identify herself as lesbian. She formed a particularly close relationship with a female missionary colleague, but without any overt sexual expression. However, on returning to Britain and her home church she felt the need to be honest, and she pressed a question in a way I have never quite forgotten. She expressed her intention, by God's grace, to lead a life of abstinence, but then asked 'As a church, are you able not only to accept me but *to celebrate* the diversity that my sexual orientation represents in God's world?'

'How many sexualities?' is at once a flawed and a far reaching question. It is *flawed* to the extent that there is no such thing as 'free-standing' human sexuality (i.e. detached from the context of our biologically and emotionally differentiated lives) that can somehow be surveyed and classified as a sort of moral taxonomy.<sup>2</sup> It is *far reaching* in that this is exactly the pluralist way many in today's society view sexual ethics; namely that there are a number of equally morally-legitimate sexual lifestyle options, depending on our make-up. Given such an ambivalent attitude to the question, perhaps a more reliable way into this subject, therefore, would be to examine what is meant in today's

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<sup>2</sup> D. F. Wright; 'The Bible knows nothing of an undifferentiated, indeterminate sexuality, waiting, so to speak, to fix its sense of direction.' *The Christian Faith and Homosexuality* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 12.

language and thought by ‘**sexual orientation**’; to look at how it is used in the contemporary ethical debate, and how biblically and pastorally we are called to respond. A significant amount of time will be spent reflecting on this issue theologically, with the double conviction that a non-strident, gentle and clear *apologetic* is an urgent need of the church, and a *renewed mind* is an urgent requirement of every authentic disciple of Christ.

### SEXUAL ORIENTATION: SOME BASIC OBSERVATIONS

There are four initial observations over which a considerable degree of agreement can be assumed. First, the existence of different sexual orientations is *an empirical reality*. If the incidence of homosexual *behaviour* is notoriously difficult to quantify, the spectrum of sexual *preference* in our society is doubly difficult to map. This is further complicated, at a global level, by an uncertain degree to which the cultural context affects same-sex orientation and expression.<sup>3</sup> It is now generally agreed, for example, that both the methodology and results of the famous American Kinsey report<sup>4</sup> were seriously flawed. It has more recently been estimated that one percent of the female population and two percent of the male population are actively homosexual, as opposed to the often quoted ten percent.<sup>5</sup> However, whatever the true demographic profile, no one doubts that there is a broad spectrum of sexual inclination in our society. This includes bi-sexuality and trans-sexuality.

Second, *sexual orientation of itself is not morally culpable*. As we shall see, this is not to say that any given sexual orientation is morally *neutral*, but it is to underline that homophile tendencies and preferences *per se* are not reprehensible. We did not choose our psycho-somatic

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends – a new exploration of homosexuality and the Bible* (London, 1995). This is the main contribution of his book, but in the end it appears that culture comes to take precedence over the creation order. Cf. David F Greenberg *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago, 1988) for a more academic exposition of a non-essentialist view.

<sup>4</sup> A. C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (Philadelphia, 1948). This report claimed that ten per cent of white American males were predominantly homosexual for up to three years between the ages of 16 and 65.

<sup>5</sup> A. M. Johnson et al, ‘Sexual Lifestyles and HIV Risks’, *Nature* 360, (December 2nd 1992), pp. 410-12. Here 1.1% of men interviewed had homosexual partners in the previous year (3.6% ever).

make-up, but we do choose to think, fantasise and act in certain ways. This distinction between orientation and practice is fundamental, though by no means a tidy one; sexual behaviour is clearly far more than genital activity. However, some form of distinction can be made between erotic and non-erotic behaviour. The contemporary gay lobby seems keen to blur this distinction under the preferred theme of 'sexual identity'.<sup>6</sup> To this issue we will return.

Thirdly, *the terminology of sexual orientation is relatively recent*. The emphasis of the biblical references to same-sex relationships is on *actions* and to ask the biblical text about orientation is anachronistic.<sup>7</sup> Fourthly, *the aetiology of sexual orientation is still largely not understood*. The nature/nurture question, namely the extent to which sexual preferences are biologically determined or shaped by socialisation, continues to be debated. It is highly probable that, in fact, a number of factors contribute to our sexual orientation.<sup>8</sup> What is important to stress, however, is that any *explanation* of a behaviour does not thereby constitute its *justification*.<sup>9</sup>

It is at this point that we leave the largely agreed, and enter into dispute, for it is clear that the notion of sexual orientation is used in the moral debate to imply very different things. We are going to examine *two* crucial aspects of this debate, both of which have profound implications for Christian pastoral care.

## 1. 'BE WHAT YOU ARE' – SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND THE MEANING OF 'NATURAL'

There is a widespread assumption abroad that sexual orientation is *de facto* a statement about our fundamental human nature. If we have same-

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<sup>6</sup> The gay activist Denis Almann: 'The greatest single victory of the gay movement over the past decade has been to shift the debate from behaviour to identity.' Quoted John C. Yates, 'Towards a Theology of Homosexuality' in *Evangelical Quarterly* 67:1 (1995), p. 71 fn. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Some have argued on this basis (e.g. *Issues of Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops*, London, 1991, Section 2.29) that the biblical evidence is therefore inconsequential. However, as stated above, the actual aetiology of homosexuality has no determinative bearing on its morality. Cf. M. Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 258.

<sup>8</sup> See Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the homosexual debate* (Leicester, 1995), pp. 131-59.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

sex desires then that must be affirmed, and responsibly expressed, if we are to be true to who we are. Just as 'left-handedness' is a minority trait, but nevertheless a legitimate expression of the differentiation of human nature, to be encouraged not suppressed, so with our sexual orientation. Much counselling of gay people is therefore essentially a matter of affirming their sexual orientation. It is for this reason, too, that gay activists view opposition to same-sex behaviour as morally equivalent to racism and sexism, for it is seen as a fundamental denial of the right to human equality. As a chaplain at Napier University, let me quote from this year's student union handbook given to all freshers.

At school you may have learned that sex should only take place between a man and a woman within marriage, that masturbation is wrong and that homosexuality is unnatural. If you start to feel confused and think you may be gay, don't panic. Sexuality is not 'a choice' or 'a preference': it is simply who you are. The only choice is to accept homosexuality, and therefore yourself, or deceive yourself and those around you by 'pretending' to be heterosexual.

This logic is, of course, strengthened when articulated theologically. The point Claire was pressing was that her lesbianism was God's creative doing, and therefore to be celebrated as part of his good, multi-faceted creation.<sup>10</sup>

How are we to respond to this? Norman Pittenger insists that there are 'no external standards of normality or naturalness'<sup>11</sup> with which such assertions can be challenged. Likewise, J. J. McNeill, in his influential *The Church and the Homosexual*, argues that 'what it means to be a man or woman in any given society or culture is a free cultural creation';<sup>12</sup> and 'the only ideals involved in all questions of sexual orientation are the great transcendent questions of justice and love'.<sup>13</sup> However, any serious

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<sup>10</sup> This is blatantly expressed by Matthew Fox, 'we can only conclude (from science) that homosexuality is indeed 'natural' for ten percent of the human race. Since grace builds on nature... then it is imperative that we let nature be active and let homosexuals be homosexuals. *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1983), p. 269.

<sup>11</sup> N. Pittenger *Time for Consent* (London, 1976), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> J. J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (London 1977), p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

biblical and theological response must grapple with Romans 1:18-32,<sup>14</sup> and this is where we will linger.

The context is that the Apostle Paul, having declared how we are made righteous by God (Romans 1:17), proceeds graphically to map out the rampant unrighteousness of a humanity in need of rescue. The essence of this unrighteousness is a displacing and dishonouring of God; a placing of our creaturely desires before the glory of the Creator (v.21). God's will for humanity has been made plain in creation (v.20), but this knowledge has been actively spurned. Paul's key point is that all human depravity flows from this fundamental idolatry, and is therefore an outworking of God's judgement which involves 'giving them up' (v.24, 26, 28) to the wrong choices and passions insisted upon. Here, observes Ernst Kasemann, 'Paul paradoxically reverses the cause and consequence: moral perversion is the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it.'<sup>15</sup> Homosexual and lesbian activity is not being specifically addressed in this passage, but is seen as one telling illustration of the inevitable moral consequence of putting creaturely pleasure before the Creator's plan. As Richard Hays puts it 'The diseased behaviour of vv.24-31 is symptomatic of the one sickness of humanity as a whole.'<sup>16</sup> Thus homosexual behaviour should never be isolated for particular condemnation.

There are two particularly pertinent observations that need to be made on this passage regarding our understanding of sexual orientation. Firstly, the determinative for sexual ethics is not the empiricism of our sexuality but the *moral order of God's creation*. Paul's references to creation unmistakably point us back to the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. Hays points out that the words 'likeness' and 'image' of Romans 1:23 are 'explicit echoes' of the creation account.<sup>17</sup> A true Christian ethic is thus never voluntarist, but ontologically grounded in the very pattern of creation. As Oliver O'Donovan has forcefully argued, this creation order has been decisively affirmed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ; God's redemption not being a redemption *from* creation but *of* creation.<sup>18</sup> Of course, this order of creation can never be clearly discerned by mere observation, for our world is fallen and distorted. It can only be known

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Hays: 'this is the only passage in the New Testament that explains the condemnation of homosexuality in an explicit way'. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 383.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Hays, *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404 fn. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order, An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, 1986).

through a humble submission to God's revelation. It was this distinction between epistemology and ontology that lay at the heart of the famous Brunner-Barth debate on natural theology.<sup>19</sup> The created order was made good, but this good cannot be naturally known. As Barth insists 'We do not understand it at all as an order that can be discovered by us, but as one which has sorted us out in the grace of God in Jesus Christ revealed in his Word.'<sup>20</sup>

Fundamental to such a revelation is that the creation order for humanity involves both *sexual differentiation*, 'male and female he created them' (Gen. 1:27), and *sexual complementarity*, Eve being 'taken out of man' and then reunited in 'one flesh' (Gen. 2:24). There is thus a *fundamental sexual dipolarity for the purpose of a profound social and spiritual complementarity* built into the very constitution of humanity. "He" and "she" belong to the same theological dogma as *imago Dei*,<sup>21</sup> however that is articulated.<sup>22</sup> Some have wanted to argue that such a creation pattern simply argues for a co-humanity, where the focus is on the communion of two persons, irrespective of gender difference.<sup>23</sup> This argument fails to see that sexual dimorphism and personal complementarity are held together in the creation accounts, and it is precisely a flouting of this that leads the Apostle Paul to use homosexuality as an example of 'an exchange' of the Creator's plan with the creature's passion. As Henri Blocher tellingly describes it, 'The rejection of 'Other' leads to the rejection of 'other' in gender.'<sup>24</sup>

We must linger over this first observation a moment longer, however, for it is being challenged in one particular respect; namely by our understanding of the *transsexual's* condition. Transsexuals are those who

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<sup>19</sup> E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. F. Fraenkel, (London, 1946).

<sup>20</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, 1960), 3/4 p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> R. S. Anderson, *On Being Human*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982), p. 111.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, famously, sees in the first creation account that sexual complementarity reflects the divine image of the trinitarian God. *Ibid.*, C.D 3/1 pp. 183-7 'the fact that [man] was created and exists as male and female will... prove to be not only a copy and imitation of his creator as such, but at the same time a type of the history of the covenant and salvation which will take place between him and his creator'. p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> L. Scanzoni and V. R. Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour? Another Christian View* (London, 1978), p. 129.

<sup>24</sup> Cited by Christopher Townsend in 'Homosexuality: Finding the Way of Truth and love' in *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 3, no. 2 (June 1994), p. 3.

are psychologically unable to identify with the sex to which their bodies belong. They are to be distinguished from hermaphrodites ('inter-sex' persons) where there is an indeterminate sex distinction (such as an XXY sex chromosome configuration as opposed to the normal XY and XX), and whose condition can clearly be seen to be ambiguous and a tragic divergence from the norm. The transsexual requesting marriage would argue that the dipolar nature of the union is being honoured. What is in question is what it actually means to be 'male' and 'female'. Is our human sexuality to be understood as a continuum with a masculine and feminine pole and a wide range of variations in between? If we are a psycho-somatic unity as Hebrew anthropology emphasises, is there not a key place for our psycho-sexual perceptions?

Two responses can be made here. First, in understanding our human ontology, we are not free simply to ignore our biological differentiation. There is an obvious 'givenness' about our sexual morphology which is not necessarily true of our psychological make-up, and certainly our sexual self-consciousness cannot be isolated from biological realities. Second, it is important that we understand the created order teleologically. Our sexually dimorphically differentiated bodies have deliberately been made to achieve heterosexual union, and at least the possibility of procreation. Our sexual anatomy and the possibility of child-bearing are not without significance; neither is the serious health risk of homosexual genital activity.<sup>25</sup> As O'Donovan puts it, 'What marriage can do, which other relationships cannot do, is to disclose the goodness of biological nature by elevating it to its teleological fulfilment in personal relationship.'<sup>26</sup> These two responses are significant in that they underline the importance of both our biological differentiation and male-female complementarity.

The second important observation from Romans 1:18-32 is the way in which Paul uses the word 'natural'. He talks about exchanging 'natural' (*kata physin*) for 'unnatural' (*para physin*) relations (vv. 26, 27). For Paul 'natural' is not a question of simply reading off from the 'what is' of empirical anthropology to discover the 'what ought to be' for human behaviour. Rather, 'natural' means what is in accordance with God's intention for creation,<sup>27</sup> recognising the chasm left by 'the Fall'

<sup>25</sup> See Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, pp. 100-130.

<sup>26</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, Grove Booklet on Ethics 48 (Nottingham, 1982), p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield sees 'nature' to mean 'the order manifest in the created world'. *Romans* (Edinburgh, 1975), vol. 1, p. 125.

between God's original intention and the world as we experience it now, and therefore going back to God's revelation in Genesis. The revisionist argument that Paul was primarily referring to lustful and 'unnatural' sexual behaviour such as heterosexuals engaging in same-sex activity,<sup>28</sup> fails to acknowledge that Paul is not reflecting on individual choices but offering a creation/fall perspective relevant for all humanity. It is in harmony with the way the *kata physin/para physin* contrast was frequently used in Hellenistic-Jewish writings of Paul's time.<sup>29</sup>

Both these observations from Romans are crucial in assessing the claim that homo-erotic activity is 'natural' when following the instincts of same-sex orientation. Same-sex erotic activity is viewed biblically as against God's will, and same-sex orientation, though not sinful in itself, is seen as a symptom of a morally disorientated world, and to this extent it is not morally neutral. It is for this reason that I had to resist Claire's request for the church to celebrate her lesbian orientation. What I did affirm, however, was that Romans 1:18-32 is about *all humanity*; in different ways all have exchanged the Creator's plan for personal desire.

## 2. 'DISCOVERING MYSELF' – SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND THE MEANING OF 'PERSON IDENTITY'

The second key area of debate regarding sexual orientation is the whole issue of *our human identity*. No one doubts that our sexual identity is a fundamental part of our personal identity, but it is the equation of the two that must be questioned.

The issue here must be seen against the much wider back-drop of our fragmented, post-modern culture, where confusion over personal identity is a major feature.<sup>30</sup> The politicising of the gay issue, and the emergence of an overt gay identity is to be taken very seriously. The painful experience of rejection and oppression of many gay people has led them, understandably, to seek dignity and respect by self-consciously defining themselves by their sexual orientation. In other words, it has often been the force of society's antipathy to homosexuality that has led gay activists to constructing a view of personhood primarily around the narrative of their perceived sexuality.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62. See also John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago 1980), p. 107ff.

<sup>29</sup> See Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 387.

<sup>30</sup> See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh *Truth is Stranger than it used to be. Biblical Faith in a Post-modern age* (London, 1995), p. 58.



Only a response which is lived as well as expounded will be a truly Christian response. Essentially it involves reconnecting the biblical story with the ubiquitous human quest for self-understanding. This narrative involves the four-fold perspective of creation, fall, redemption and eschatology. Only in this way will it become plain that the *fallacy* of equating sexual orientation and essential being is also the *tragedy* of having a truncated and impoverished view of who we are. The primary reference point is our being made in 'God's image', to be understood both in terms of our distinctive creatureliness and our being relationally orientated towards God.<sup>31</sup> We are both created and confronted by God; and here lies our human dignity and significance. But sin has disorientated us, leaving us distanced from God, distorted in our perceptions and disfigured in our living. The Christian gospel is that our true and intended identity can only be found through the grace of God in Christ, realised now in part (2 Cor. 5:17), one day to be enjoyed in glorious completion (Phil. 3:21).<sup>32</sup>

In a recent issue of *Leadership*, the journal ran a profoundly moving autobiographical article by a pastor who had struggled for years with homosexual temptations, often resorting to gay pornography for sexual release. Eventually he sought help and experienced a considerable measure of freedom. He ended the article in this way:

I once believed I was homosexual because of my thoughts and desires. I believed I was stuck in that role and that I should see myself in that way. I have since come to know that God sees me in Christ as a new creation. I am not a homosexual. I am a Christian who struggles at times with homosexual thoughts that have diminished considerably. But that is just part of who I am. It is not my identity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Colin Gunton, 'To be in the image of God is not to have some timeless quality like reason, or anything else, but to exist in a directedness, between our coming from nothing and our being brought through Christ before the throne of the Father.' *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle, 1992), p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> The *St. Andrew Day Statement* puts it very well: 'At the deepest ontological level... 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.' *Churchman* 110 (1996), p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> 'My Secret Struggle', *Leadership* 20, no. 4 (Fall 1999), pp. 84-90.

Equally moving is the testimony of Alex Davidson, who describes in his book, *The Returns of Love*, the agonising struggle ‘between law and lust’ as he sought to live a celibate lifestyle. For him hope lies primarily in the eschatological reality.

Isn't it one of the most wretched things about this condition that when you look ahead, the same impossible road seems to continue indefinitely? You're driven to rebellion when you think of there being no point in it and to despair when you think of there being no limit to it. That's why I find it a comfort, when I feel desperate or rebellious, or both, to remind myself of God's promise that one day it will be finished.<sup>34</sup>

It is at precisely this point of holding a biblical understanding of personal identity, however, that heterosexual Christians run the risk of gross hypocrisy. We cannot encourage those with same-sex orientation to define themselves more broadly, whilst at the same time not accept them on the basis of that fuller definition. All too often we become obsessed with someone's sexual orientation to the exclusion of all else. This leads us on to consideration of our pastoral response.

### 3. A COMMUNITY OF HOPE – SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

Before we begin to profile what could be an appropriate Christian response, it must first be acknowledged that, at this point, we are in grave danger of gross self-deception. In spite of extensive writing on the subject of homosexuality and pastoral care, *the reality is* that very few churches have any overt, or at least thought-out, ministry to gay people. At best, it is left to discreet pastoral care by the minister, the professional counsellor, the chaplain to HIV victims or specialist para-church organisations such as ‘True Freedom Trust’. Even less available are role models of churches seeking to offer a compassionate Christian presence to the gay community. It is to be argued here that the most critical need is the existence of loving, accepting *Christian communities that imitate Christ*. Christ's acceptance and transformation of the woman of Samaria (John 4:4-26), his forgiveness – and call to holiness – of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-12), and his welcome of a ‘sinful woman’ (Luke 7:36-39) stand as *the model* for ministry in this area.

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<sup>34</sup> Alex Davidson, *The Returns of Love* (Leicester, 1970), p. 51.

*A repentant community*

It is a grave mistake to perceive the gay and lesbian community as a homogeneous grouping. Whilst there are some who are strident and combative, many people with a same-sex orientation suffer a huge amount of personal pain and anguish. Sharon Kyle, working with a Christian support group for people with a same-sex orientation, comments, 'In my experience, nobody is more aware of the need for forgiveness and the reality of the love of God than the Christian struggling with homosexuality.'<sup>35</sup> For many who are Christian, the church has simply added to this pain, often so caught up with defending biblical truth that it has been oblivious to personal need. Christians with same-sex orientation can all too easily have no home in either the gay community or the Christian community. John Stott concludes, 'I rather think that the existence of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement is a vote of censure on the church.'<sup>36</sup> Only the church that includes the issue of homosexuality in its prayers of *confession* as much as in its prayers of *intercession* will be in a position to offer effective help.<sup>37</sup>

*An accepting community*

There are two fundamental ways the church is called to be accepting. First there is an urgent need to *accept the reality* that in almost every congregation and youth group there will be those struggling with the issue of their sexual orientation. We need to develop a culture of honesty, and through the preaching and teaching ministry of the church raise awareness and give permission for people to talk openly. In some of our churches there is simply no space for sexual issues to be aired, debated and acted on; a case not so much of homophobia as 'homoclaustrophobia'.

Secondly, there must be a genuinely warm acceptance of *those who admit to being of same-sex orientation and Christian*. They need to be affirmed through hospitality and friendship as brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the one Body. A major part of our problem is a lack of understanding of what God's grace really means. We cannot, however,

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in J. I. H. McDonald *Christian Values. Theory and Practice in Christian Ethics Today* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by John Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 417.

<sup>37</sup> Lance Pierson offers a very helpful liturgy of repentance in his booklet *No Gay Areas? Pastoral Care of Homosexual Christians*, Grove Books (Nottingham, 1997), pp. 7-8.

avoid the sharp question of the church's response to those who choose to be sexually active outside heterosexual marriage. Clearly, it is vital that there is no difference of attitude or policy between same-sex transgressions, heterosexual sins and any other unbiblical behaviour, be it gossiping, greed or gambling. We are all broken people seeking God's grace in a journey to wholeness in Christ. Different stances no doubt will be adopted here, but what must not be lost sight of is that the more missionary (and therefore biblical) a congregation becomes, the more there will be those on a genuine journey towards Christ, but who at a given point in time are living openly non-Christian lifestyles. Here there is wisdom in adopting the philosophy of being a church 'open at the edges but committed at the core'. Dave Andrews advocates churches moving from a 'closed-set-perspective' to a 'centre-set-perspective'. The centre is Christ, and more important than doctrinally policing the periphery is facilitating movement towards the Centre.<sup>38</sup> Put another way, what is of most importance pastorally is to discern the *orientation of heart*. If someone has a heart for God and therefore a willingness to obey him, then space should be given for that to happen, recognising there may well be times of failure.<sup>39</sup> For those determined to live in wilful defiance of biblical standards some form of church discipline seems sadly inevitable,<sup>40</sup> remembering that all discipline in scripture is meant to be redemptive.

### *An agape community*

What is unacceptable is a Christian community that demands sexual abstinence outside of heterosexual marriage without offering realistic support. This will almost certainly be a costly and demanding experience, running the risk of misunderstanding and disappointment. But if there is any credence in Elizabeth Moberly's thesis<sup>41</sup> that much same-sex attraction in adults is due to same-sex deprivation in childhood, then there is a real need for such deficiency to be made up in accountable, non-erotic

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<sup>38</sup> Dave Andrews *Christ-anarchy – discovering a radical spirituality of compassion* (Berkhamsted, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Michael Vasey, "The question becomes not "Have you crossed the line?" but "As one struggling sinner to another, are you making progress in your growth in grace?" *Strangers and Friends*, p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> Some advocate 'optimum homosexual morality', a reluctant acceptance of homosexual cohabitation which is permanent, seen as at least preferable to promiscuity.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (London, 1983).

but close same-sex friendships. Mike Starkey calls our generation 'relationally stunted but sexually sated'.<sup>42</sup> Time for friendship is greatly under-valued in many churches. The existence of accepting home-groups, youth groups and open Christian homes is vital. Churches are notoriously poor at supporting single people, and for most of them the opportunity of marriage lies before them. How much more do we owe support to those whose only prospect may be life-long sexual abstinence? The challenge of offering emotional fulfilment and intimacy within a context of sexual discipline is immense, but one we urgently need to tackle. Only when Christian communities become a genuine alternative to gay clubs will we see a major change, and that is some challenge! As Tom Schmidt pleads, 'It is not the nuclear family we need to promote but the hospitable family. We do not need people who love family values nearly as much as we need families who value love for people.'<sup>43</sup> We also must be careful to focus on the *gifts and contribution* of those with homophile tendencies rather than just their problems.

### *An apologetic community*

There is a great need to offer clear teaching on sexuality; as Lance Pierson says 'to preach *about* homosexuality rather than *against* it'.<sup>44</sup> This is particularly important among our young people where there is so much confusion.<sup>45</sup> Michele Guinness, in an article entitled 'No sex please, we're Christians' says this:

To judge by many a church teaching programme, we tend to hope people will pick up our moral standards by osmosis! We leave them guessing, and what they tend to pick up are some very negative vibes.<sup>46</sup>

The issue of the church as 'a moral community' is in need of urgent examination. Are there better ways of nurturing moral formation than just preaching the occasional sermon on sexual and social ethics? There is much scope for inter-active seminar-style and small group reflection. Above all, there needs to be an 'embodied apologetic' that both shapes

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<sup>42</sup> Mike Starkey, *God, Sex and Generation X* (London, 1997), p. 45.

<sup>43</sup> Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, p. 170.

<sup>44</sup> Lance Pierson, *No Gay Areas*, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> In a survey I did with colleagues (Scottish Baptist ministers) only 34% said they had addressed the subject of homosexuality from the pulpit in the last three years.

<sup>46</sup> Michele Guinness, 'No sex please, we're Christians', *Anglicans for Renewal*, vol. 66 (Autumn 1996), p. 7.

behaviour within the community and offers an integrity to the world outside.<sup>47</sup> It has been well said that 'Post-moderns can best understand a holy, loving, just, forgiving, life-giving God of grace when they see a holy, just, forgiving, life-giving community founded on the grace of God.... The Church becomes the plausibility structure of the Christian world.'<sup>48</sup>

### *A healing community*

Much controversy still surrounds the issue of the extent to which those with same-sex orientation can expect to become heterosexual through the ministry of counselling and healing prayer. I Corinthians 6:11 implies radical transformation, but is silent on whether this means becoming ex-gay or fully heterosexual.<sup>49</sup> What is not in doubt is the Church's vocation to be a community of grace and a living anticipation of the future eschatological reality of God's renewal of all things. Only in the soil of forgiveness, acceptance and hope will any of us grow up to be more like Christ, which is the biblical definition of healing.

Soon after Claire had seen me she left the church and began cohabiting with a lesbian friend. Her failure is matched by my pastoral failure. As one struggling person to another, the hope of Christ still beckons us both.

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<sup>47</sup> Stanley Hauerwas argues in his *A community of Character* (Notre Dame, 1981) that the primary ethical agenda of the church is not the betterment of society but the integrity of the church. 'For the service that Christians are called upon to provide does not have as its aim to make the world better, but to demonstrate that Jesus has made possible a better world' (p. 49).

<sup>48</sup> Dennis Hollinger, 'The Church as Apologetic' in *Christian Apologetics in a Post-modern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1995), p. 191.

<sup>49</sup> Paul K. Jewett has a very sobering footnote of the false claims of some respected (American) evangelical organisations claiming full healing of those with same-sex orientation: *Who are we: Our Dignity as Humans. A neo-evangelical theology* (Grand Rapids, 1996), p. 333 fn. 267.