

## Cracking the Binary Code

Benny Hazlehurst

### Abstract

This paper offers a critique of the 'binary' nature of much biblical interpretation and ethical belief in the Church, rejecting simplistic 'either-or' approaches to both. Instead there is offered an interpretation of key biblical texts through the lenses of *circumstances*, *needs* and *motivation*. It is argued that, when these factors are taken into account, even for Evangelicals, there is no longer a substantive biblical case against the acceptance of faithful, loving same-sex partnerships and the development of a positive Christian ethic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. At the very least, the complexity of the interpretive task must lead to greater openness to and acceptance of those from whom we differ.

### Choices

My teenage children love playing computer games. For that matter so do I. Among the pure action games are some which require a little more thought. There are choices to make, and as you make those choices the game unfolds, for better or worse. 'Skyrim' is a good example. Set in a mythical world of different powers, guilds, and warring factions you can choose your race, skills and weapons. You can be a warrior or a poet – a *Stormcloak* or an *Imperial*, an elf or a human – you can even choose your religion. Amidst the action sequences fighting off wolves, bandits, or assassins, there are also moral decisions to make: to fight or walk away, to intimidate or persuade, to follow or rebel.

But as I played Skyrim, there is one thing which bothered me. So many of the 'choices' boil down to a choice between two options. And I often found myself being asked to choose between two things, neither of which I wanted to choose. I found myself complaining to my kids about this. "But dad, you have to choose one or other option to progress in the game," they say to me. Essentially the game is based on a series of binary choices: yes or no, fight or flee, be loyal or betray. Ultimately I stopped playing because in so many situations, neither option seemed the right thing to do.

As an evangelical of course, I am also accustomed to being given binary choices. At University 30 years ago, the Christian Union gave me a choice. Do I believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, or just a human creation? If I said it was the Word of God then I could call myself an evangelical; if not, then I could not. For me that was no big issue: 'Yes' I said, 'I do,' but the binary choices didn't stop there. Did I believe that Scripture is inerrant or merely infallible? Am I a premillennialist or a postmillennialist? Calvinist or Arminian? Evangelical or Charismatic? Was I 'sound' or 'unsound' in my understanding of the atonement? At each point there was clearly an answer which the person asking the question wanted to hear, and one which they didn't.

But what if we don't want to follow either of the given options? What if I think that life and faith are a little more complicated than that? What if I don't want to nail my colours to a particular mast, or be pigeon-holed by a particular category or label? As an evangelical Christian, Jesus Christ is at the centre of my life. He is my Lord and Saviour and I believe that I have been born again by the Holy Spirit. I believe that the Bible is inspired by God and I approach it in prayer to deepen my understanding of God, as well as to be encouraged, challenged or rebuked. But that does not mean that everything in Scripture is an open or shut case – a binary choice between right and wrong, sound or unsound.

Take baptism for one example. The majority of evangelicals outside the Church of England would say that only adult baptism is authorised by Scripture. Put simply, how can someone 'repent and believe' if they are not old enough to make that decision? In the Church of England of course, evangelical clergy are expected to baptise infants as part of a covenant theology of baptism. Which is right? And if you have been baptised as a baby, have you really been baptised or not? And what about the Old Testament Law? As Christians, are we still subject to the Law, or are we free from it? Paul is very clear in the Epistles that we are no longer under the Law, but Jesus said that 'not one iota' of the Law shall disappear and that anyone who teaches others to disregard even the smallest command in the Law will be considered least in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 5:19).

As another example, are Christians required to obey the law of the land they live in? Paul seems to think so. In Romans 13, he tells us categorically that rulers and authorities are placed there by God and should be obeyed. Indeed he goes on to say that whoever 'rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves' (Rom. 13:2).<sup>1</sup> Yet within a few years Christians had to deal with a Roman Empire which was hostile to their faith and demanded that they renounce their faith in Christ on pain of death. In more recent history, the deeply embedded Lutheran theology of obedience to the State resulted in the church being wrong-footed and compromised at every turn in Nazi Germany as Hitler developed his final solution.

Wherever we look, we find examples of questions which are presented as binary propositions as if there were no other options available: Is it right or wrong? Should I do this or that? Do I believe this or that? When my kids are playing Skyrim, or some other RPG (Role Playing Game) such binary questions bother me. Reducing decisions to a simple binary choice contains significant dangers, and if we approach life in the same way – allowing others to reduce our life decisions to a series of binary questions – we can face much more serious dangers. If each binary choice is based on the answer to our last binary choice, it is all too easy to get drawn into a scenario where we find we have lost our moral way.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bible references are NIV (1984) unless otherwise stated.

As a prison chaplain, I meet many people who know that their choices have led to them spending time behind bars, but all too often they cannot see how they could have chosen anything different. At each stage they were faced with a binary choice and felt compelled to choose one of the two options they were presented with. Ultimately this led them to a no-win situation where both options were wrong, but they still felt compelled to choose one. To combat that kind of thinking, my advice to my children is simple: in real life, don't let people back you into a corner by limiting your choices, and then forcing you to choose between those alternatives. If you don't like the options on offer, look for another way.

### **A different way**

It is this binary approach which has led us to such an impasse on evangelical responses to sexuality. There are people who point to the 5 or 6 verses in the Bible which seem to speak of sexual activity between people of the same sex as sinful, depraved and an act of rebellion against God. They refer to the 'plain truth of Scripture' as self-evident in matters of sexuality. They point to the fact that Eve was created for Adam in the Garden of Eden, and that this forms the creation ordinance for marriage quoted by Jesus himself. Then there are those who point to the quality of love and relationship between committed faithful same-sex couples and point to 1 John 4:16 which is read at the beginning of the marriage service in Common Worship: 'God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.' They point to the different cultural context of Leviticus and the very different moral framework of the Greco-Roman world in which the New Testament was written. As the arguments have developed among Evangelicals, this has often led to the framing of a simple binary choice: uphold the authority of Scripture and condemn all same-sex activity or reject Scripture and accept same-sex relationships. Among many evangelicals, this has become a 'Shibboleth test' of whether someone can call themselves an evangelical (Judges 12:5-6). The fact that attitudes to sexuality have become such a defining issue shows how polarised this binary choice has become.

Faced with the choice of rejecting the authority of Scripture or rejecting same-sex relationships, most evangelicals have naturally chosen to uphold Scripture and reject any change on sexuality. But is this really the choice we are faced with, or a false choice based on a false binary construct? The same kind of choice was presented to the Roman Catholic Inquisition in the early 1600s when Galileo was put on trial for heresy for the heinous crime of teaching that the earth revolved around the sun. Prior to the seventeenth century, Church teaching and scientific understanding were based on the doctrine that the Earth was created by God at the centre of the universe and that everything in the heavens revolved around the Earth, including the sun. This doctrine came from the Scriptures themselves where several verses clearly refer to the earth as being fixed and immovable, with other heavenly bodies moving around it.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult today for us to appreciate how earth-shattering Galileo's new

---

<sup>2</sup> See references such as 1 Chron. 16:30, Ps. 93:1, 96:10, 104:5, Eccles. 1:5. These are best read in the KJV as more modern translations have sometimes adapted the way they are translated to accommodate our updated understanding.

understanding was! It contravened Church teaching and Biblical understanding. It re-ordered the universe in such a fundamental way that the issue was perceived as calling into question the very coherence of Christian doctrine and theology.

One of the early investigators of the matter was Cardinal Bellarmine who, although sympathetic to Galileo, said that interpreting heliocentrism (the Earth orbiting the Sun) as physically real would be 'a very dangerous thing, likely not only to irritate all scholastic philosophers and theologians, but also to harm the Holy Faith by rendering Holy Scripture as false.'<sup>3</sup> In saying this, he framed the binary choice for the Church and the Inquisition – accept this new understanding and reject Holy Scripture, or denounce this heresy and uphold Scripture. The parallels to the issue at hand are striking.

On 22nd June 1633, the astronomer Galileo was found guilty of heresy and sentenced to imprisonment at the pleasure of the Inquisition. He spent the rest of his life under house arrest and his writings (both past and future) were banned. Yet today, we all accept that the earth orbits the sun without question, and would be amazed if anyone suggested that this dangerous understanding of our universe is a challenge to the authority of Scripture. As time has gone on, the Christian Church came to see a different way of interpreting those verses in the Bible as expressions of faith rooted in the context in which they were written. As our understanding of both our world and our theology has developed, we have found a different way, free from the binary choice which Cardinal Bellarmine presented.

Jesus also disliked the binary choices with which he was often presented. What should we do with the woman caught in adultery – stone her or reject the Law? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? And when it came to creation ordinances, he also rejected the simplistic approach of the Pharisees who loved to portray everything as black and white. In Mark 2:23-28, the Pharisees put Jesus on the spot by accusing his disciples of breaking the Sabbath law in picking some heads of grain as they walked through a field. Jesus' reply is stark and striking. He first reminded them of 1 Sam. 21 where King David and his followers ate consecrated bread which only the priests were allowed to eat. This was not, of course a Sabbath story – David was fleeing from Saul with his followers and they were hungry. Then he says, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath' (v. 28 NRSV). This saying would have run counter to everything the Pharisees understood about the first creation story in Genesis.

In Genesis 1 God created the heavens and the earth in six days and then, at the beginning of Genesis 2 he rests on the seventh day. This pattern is hard-wired into Jewish culture to this day and the Old Testament has large swathes which are devoted to observing the Sabbath law! It was seen as a creation ordinance – you rest on the Sabbath because God rested on the Sabbath and the Pharisees had built a huge edifice of tradition on this Sabbath

---

<sup>3</sup> Finocchiaro, M. (1989). *The Galileo Affair: A Documentary History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp. 67-69 which can also be viewed on-line at <http://inters.org/Bellarmino-Letter-Foscarini>

ordinance. But here Jesus stands that understanding on its head. He says it was the needs of humanity that caused God to create the Sabbath, not the needs of God. God was foreseeing our need and meeting it by setting us an example which would provide for our rest and recreation. Furthermore, by quoting the story of David and the consecrated bread, Jesus was saying that the human need which God meets, trumps the institution which God has created. To know if an activity is right or wrong, we need to look deeper into the circumstances, needs and motivation of the participants, rather than simply look it up in a book of rules. It is not a simple 'right or wrong' binary question.

For the disciples on that day, they were walking through a field of grain. They were hungry, and they picked a few heads of grain. They weren't harvesting in a way which could be described as working on the Sabbath, and Jesus clearly accepted that what they were doing was harmless. King David was fleeing for his life and needed food for him and his companions to give them strength for the journey. According to the Jesus, these circumstances, needs and motivation trumped the law which said that consecrated bread could only be eaten by the priests. So what happens when we look deeper into the circumstances, needs and motivation for same-sex relationships, both in the Bible and now?

## **Circumstances**

### **Old Testament**

The first area we need to examine is that the Biblical circumstances (or context) for the verses which condemn same-sex sex. As we do so we will find that they are far removed from our own context today. Even those who argue strongly for a conservative theology on sexuality acknowledge that the ancient middle east provides us with ample evidence for homosexual male cult prostitution. Robert Gagnon in *The Bible and Homosexual Practise* makes a good analysis of the Old Testament context and says, 'There is good evidence of homosexual cult prostitution in Israel during the period of the divided monarchy.'<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word *qēdēš*, meaning 'a male cult prostitute', appears a number of times in the Old Testament in 1 and 2 Kings, and Deuteronomy. For example (Deut. 23:17-18 NRSV):

None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute (*qēdēšā*); none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute (*qēdēš*). You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a male prostitute into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are abhorrent to the Lord your God.

He also rules out the possibility of male prostitutes offering heterosexual sex as there is no documentary evidence from elsewhere in the ancient Middle East to substantiate this. Such prostitution came into Israel from the religions and cults of the surrounding peoples, and was tied to accessing the power of the deity of the male prostitute. Similarly a Babylonian

---

<sup>4</sup> Gaganon, R.A.J. (2001). *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 100ff.

text says that, 'If a man copulates with a male cult prostitute, a hard destiny will leave him'.<sup>5</sup> It is also worth noting that in Deut. 23:18 the wages of a male prostitute are referred to as the wages of 'a dog' (keleb) – a word which finds echoes in the New Testament in a pattern which closely resembles Romans 1 (Rev. 22:14-15):

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that some male prostitutes made themselves appear as women for their ritual sex. It is no surprise therefore, that Lev. 18:22 states that, 'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. Even the choice of Hebrew word *to-ebah*, which is translated here as 'abomination', is significant. The word *to-ebah* occurs many times in the Old Testament, and is primarily associated with the worship of idols. In Deuteronomy, there are 15 verses which use the word, and 12 of them refer to idolatry. One example is Deut. 27:15 (KJV):

Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination unto the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place.'

In the books of Kings and Chronicles, *to-ebah* is used 10 times, almost all of them referring specifically to the worship of idols and again there is a link in 1 Kings 14:23-24 with male temple prostitutes (KJV):

For they also built them high places, and images, and groves, on every high hill, and under every green tree. There were also male temple prostitutes (*qēdēš*) in the land. They committed all the abominations of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.

In the Old Testament, *to-ebah* is a word rich in religious overtones, a little like 'sacrilege' in English today. In the Old Testament Law and history there is a clear and specific link in the minds of the people of Israel between *to-ebah* and idolatry, and between homosexual sex and religious male prostitution.<sup>6</sup> This context is very different from the circumstances for same-sex partnerships today. They are not located in cultic prostitution or idolatry, and increasingly they are located in stable, faithful exclusive partnerships which, for many people today resemble the ideals of marriage.

## New Testament

When we go to the New Testament the circumstances are no less different. As Jesus appears to have said nothing on the subject of same-sex relationships, we turn to Paul's epistles for

---

<sup>5</sup> Gaganon, R.A.J. (2001). *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Accepting Evangelicals. (July 2011). Bible Focus 2 – Leviticus 18. Retrieved December 30, 2013, from <http://www.acceptingevangelicals.org/2011/07/bible-focus-part-2-leviticus-18/>

the only 3 references in the New Testament (Rom. 1:26-27, 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10). The first thing to notice is that the word 'homosexual' did not exist in Paul's day. In fact it only begins to appear in the English language in the nineteenth century. The concept of homosexual orientation is one which is relatively new in human society. In the Greek world through which Paul moved there were certainly same-sex acts, but that does not mean that monogamous, faithful, committed same-sex relationships were the norm. Same-sex acts of various kinds existed between teachers and pupils, in the military, in religious worship, and at the gymnasium. Even today scholars find it a huge challenge to try to unravel their complexity and significance.<sup>7</sup>

But this is not the issue that Christians are grappling with today. The overwhelming majority of gay Christians today are not fighting for the right to indulge in promiscuous, religious, or hedonistic sex. They simply want the Church to recognise the same Christian ethic for them as for heterosexual couples, and increasingly want the same structures and sacraments to frame their relationships. This would not have been what Paul saw as he journeyed through the Greco-Roman culture of his day. What he would have been aware of was the bewildering array of sexual activity which existed – much of which, as a Jew, he would have had little comprehension.

As a result gay Christians have, for many years, said that they don't recognise themselves in the things Paul writes about in respect of homosexuality. Put simply, the things that Paul condemned are not the things that LGBT Christians aspire to today. On top of that, there are considerable problems in translating the words which Paul uses. In 1 Cor. 6:9 we find the verse, often quoted, which says:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

But the words translated as 'male prostitutes' and 'homosexual offenders' are far from clear in the Greek which Paul wrote. The two words are *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. *Malakoi* also appears in the Gospels: In Matt. 11:8 and Luke 7:25 Jesus asks people what they expected to see when they went to John the Baptist:

What did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

The word translated as 'fine' is *malakoi*. More usually it means 'soft' and was often used in Greek language to speak disparagingly about people who were soft willed, spineless, or lacking in courage. In English translations, it was not until the twentieth century that *malakoi* was given a homosexual meaning. What was more common before that was the meaning

---

<sup>7</sup> For further reading see Davidson, J. (2007). *The Greeks and Greek Love*. London: Phoenix.

found in John Wesley's Bible Notes. He describes *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians, as those 'Who live in an easy, indolent way; taking up no cross, enduring no hardship.'<sup>8</sup>

*Arsenokoitai* is even more difficult to unravel. It does not appear in any contemporary Greek texts (religious or secular) and appears for the very first time in 1 Corinthians. One tool in discerning the meaning of words is to observe how they are used in a variety of contemporary contexts. In the case of *arsenokoitai*, we have no contemporary contexts outside of Paul's writings to compare. This lack of comparable examples to cross-reference has prompted many to ask how we can know for sure what Paul meant by it, and how can we translate it with any degree of certainty?

The most likely explanation is that Paul invented the word, by putting together two words from the Greek translation of Lev. 18:22 which condemns someone who lies with a man 'as with a woman'. But as we have seen previously, this condemnation was almost certainly linked to religious prostitution and worship of idols. The command was designed to keep Israel separate from the dubious religious practices of the cultures around them, and free from idol worship.

This of course brings us back to what Paul saw in the Greco-Roman world. He would have been aware of same-sex acts in the context of Greek religion, Greek education, Greek gymnasiums – in short 'Greek Culture' – and he knew that the church must be kept pure from that in the same way that the holiness code of Leviticus was designed to keep Israel pure from the dubious practises and idol worship of those around them. If we can have any degree of certainty about these words, it is that they condemned the Greek expression of same-sex acts, which are very different in context to that of gay men and women today in loving, committed, faithful, exclusive same-sex relationships. But what about Romans 1? Rom. 1:26-27 reads (NRSV):

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

The passage is often used to explain why same-sex acts are wrong. For many conservative Evangelicals, it explains how people became homosexuals – that homosexual attraction is the result of a perversion of natural, God-given attraction and emotion. Such desires are the result of exchanging natural feelings for unnatural ones. It is one rationale behind 'homosexual healing' which seeks to re-orientate homosexuals into heterosexuals by a combination of prayer, confession, forgiveness and self-discipline.

---

<sup>8</sup> Wesley Centre Online. (2011). *Notes on St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Retrieved December 30, 2013, from <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/notes-on-st-pauls-first-epistle-to-the-corinthians/#Chapter+VI>. Commentary on the KJV translation of *malakoi* as 'effeminate'.

But v. 26 begins with the words, 'Because of this...' (NIV), which means that we should ask ourselves 'Because of what?' And as we read back in the chapter, we find very different circumstances emerging. Why had God given them over to shameful lusts? In Rom. 1:18-25 it is clearly because they knew God through creation, but neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him (vv. 18-21) and they exchanged the glory of God for images and idols which they served and worshipped (vv. 22-25). In Romans, it is idolatry (worshipping other gods) which leads people to God's wrath, shown here as in so many places in scripture by God abandoning them to the consequences of their own choices, and the homosexual lusts which Paul is describing are the result of the rejection of God and morality. This does not describe LGBT Christians. They have not exchanged the glory of God for created idols. They are prayerful, devout, committed Christians, worshipping God faithfully, and giving him the glory.

As we then read the following few verses of Romans 1, the picture becomes even clearer (Rom. 1:28-31):

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Do LGBT people fit this description? Have they become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, envy, murder, deceit and malice? Are they gossips, slanderers, God-haters, inventing ways of doing evil? Are they senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless? For anyone who has gay friends, the answer is a resounding 'No!' So who was Paul writing about?

The answer, of course, is staring us in the face – Rome! The epistle is, of course, a letter to the church in Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire, the seat of power. It was also the centre of Roman religion, politics, the Emperors and the ruling classes who were famous for their ruthless greed, intrigue and debauchery. It was this pagan society about which Paul was writing. Roman society and Greek culture were the environments in which Paul saw homosexual activity, alongside all the idolatry and power games of the Greco-Roman world. It was not born out of love, or orientation, but out of idolatry, greed, lust and abuse of power. That cannot be more different to the circumstances in which we evaluate the place of same-sex relationships today.

## Needs

'God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.' This is a catch-phrase which has been quoted to me many times on the subject of same-sex relationships. It is, of course, a binary construct of the kind that I began this article by considering. It is designed to silence all

arguments towards a more open approach to loving partnerships and in particular, to same-sex marriage.

It is true that in the account of the creation of Adam and Eve we find our Biblical paradigm for marriage. Although it is not the only consideration in forming our theology of marriage, it is the foundation which is taken up by both Jesus when questioned about divorce (Matt. 19:1-9) and Paul in his advice to husbands and wives in Eph. 5. Yet if we merely look at the 'end product' in Genesis 2, without seeking to understand God's intentions, we run the same risk as the Pharisees whose limited and highly restrictive view of the Sabbath went so far out of kilter with what God had intended.

Genesis 2 is not primarily about the mechanics of creation; it is about relationships – our relationship with God, the world, and each other. Neither is it about procreation – the command to be fruitful and multiply is found in the first account of creation (Gen. 1:28) not in the story of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 2 we find Adam created first and placed in the garden of God's blessing. He has everything he needs to feed his body and a pure untainted relationship with God to feed his spirit. Yet there is still something missing. God says, 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Gen. 2:18). There is still a need for another relationship to complete the paradigm of life in all its fullness.

Just as God's words of power are crucial to the first story of creation in Genesis 1, so God's words of love and care for Adam are crucial to understanding Genesis 2. God then created the animals and brought them to Adam, but still no suitable partner was found. So finally God created Eve as the one who is 'bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh' (v. 23) and Adam rejoices in the one who completed his need for that unique relationship. 'At last,' he says, 'this is the one!' In their coming together that 'one flesh' is re-united in what we call marriage, and we can all relate to that yearning for the one who completes us – the one with whom we might fall in love, and express that love in life-long commitment. Whilst we must recognise that not everyone finds their life-partner, there is always that hope, that possibility, of meeting the person who 'completes' us.

But what of those whose attraction is not toward the opposite sex? What if the person who we fall in love with – who completes that God-given need within us – is of the same sex? Does that negate the fundamental human need which God addresses? Those who are attracted to people of the same sex still have the same God given yearning for that relationship which will bring a sense of fulfilment, a sense of completeness, a re-uniting of that 'one flesh' of creation.

Gay or straight, the need is still there. While it is true that some people (of all orientations) are actively called by God to celibacy, this is the exception, not the rule, and celibacy which is imposed on others is anathema to the concept of celibacy as vocation. As Sister Rosemarie said in the 2004 General Synod Debate on sexuality, 'For those of us under religious vows,

who treasure celibacy as call and gift, the idea of forced celibacy is as abhorrent as the idea of forced marriage.<sup>9</sup>

If we take the same approach as Jesus did in questions about the Sabbath (the creation ordinance at the beginning of Gen. 2) then the need which God seeks to meet is more important than the institution which God creates to meet that need.

## Motives

A revolution has taken place over the last 30 years. Once upon a time, the leading voices of the 'gay community' (if there is such a homogeneous thing) regarded marriage as an outdated bankrupt heterosexual institution which the gay subculture rejected outright. Following centuries of legal repression, institutionalised discrimination and imposed religious guilt, the San Francisco Bay approach to gay relationships offered a new freedom with open relationships, polyamory, and unrestricted sex. Indeed, marriage was in decline, divorce was on the increase and many heterosexuals were starting to think of marriage as outdated and arcane.

Yet even then there were the seeds of future change in the LGBT community. In the UK, the band 'Frankie Goes to Hollywood' released their hit song 'Relax' in Autumn 1983. The song was banned by the BBC for its sexually provocative lyrics, record sleeve and video which was set in a gay S&M club. It epitomised a hedonistic homosexual sexual lifestyle and rejection of sexual norms. Yet only one year later, the same band released 'The Power of Love' with its video portraying the Nativity and chorus declaring, 'The power of love / a force from above / cleansing my soul... / make love your goal.'

Over the last 30 years, the excesses of the 70s and 80s have largely ebbed away, and in their place we have seen the emergence of stable, committed partnerships as the norm. In the last decade this change has seen the introduction of Civil Partnerships and now Same-Sex Marriage, as lesbian and gay couples have sought the same mutual commitment and public recognition as heterosexual couples. It is true, of course, that homosexuals can embrace promiscuity as a lifestyle, just like anyone else, but heterosexuals are by no means immune from such temptation, as witnessed by the exponential rise in pornography over the last 30 years, most of which is aimed at heterosexual men.

While some regard same-sex marriage as a threat to marriage, others have welcomed the fact that more and more same-sex couples want to express the degree of love and commitment to each other which heterosexuals have traditionally found in marriage. Amongst ordinary same-sex couples it is this motivation, rather than some drive for legislative equality, that makes them want to cement their love in Civil Partnerships and Marriage.

---

<sup>9</sup>General Synod. (2004). *Report of Proceedings – February Group of Sessions*. London: Church House Publishing. pp. 248-249.

## Conclusions

Those of us who have same-sex couples as our friends have seen the presence of God in their love for one another. For some of us, this recognition has been a reluctant one initially, because of the Scriptural tradition we have received, but when we have finally acknowledged the good fruit which the Holy Spirit is growing in their lives we have realised that the time has come to re-evaluate our theology.<sup>10</sup> When we follow Jesus' example in looking at the Sabbath, and we look deeper into the circumstances, needs and motives around same-sex relationships today, we see that God is indeed calling us to acceptance and inclusion.

That is why groups like Accepting Evangelicals have been providing an alternative to the polarised debate which so often characterises our response on sexuality. The recent 'Pilling Report' for the House of Bishops on Human Sexuality recognised the work of Accepting Evangelicals in promoting an 'Including Evangelical' perspective.<sup>11</sup> Like Peter in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10) we have realised that where God is giving his Holy Spirit in blessing, we have no authority to withhold that blessing. As Evangelicals, we need to beware of the simple binary question which gives us two options, neither of which is right. The binary choice between rejecting the authority of Scripture or rejecting same-sex relationships is a false one, just as the choice between the authority of Scripture and heliocentrism was a false choice in Galileo's day.

Which leads me to one more binary myth to dispel – that we either hold to a traditional view and preserve Church unity, or we become more inclusive on sexuality and face schism. Accepting Evangelicals does not require its members to be pro-gay in their understanding of scripture – it merely asks us all to accept that others can hold a different interpretation of Scripture with integrity. We have members who would agree with all of the above, and we have members who would not agree with that interpretation of Scripture. What unites us is a desire to see the Church move towards the acceptance of faithful, loving same sex partnerships at every level of church life, and the development of a positive Christian ethic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

None of us have got a monopoly on truth – whoever we are – and there are many things on which Christians disagree, even Evangelicals, and yet we manage to hold to the bond of unity which unites us in the fellowship of Christ. Mutual understanding and respect is the key to finding a third option for the Church. My prayer is that we find this way together.

---

<sup>10</sup> Accepting Evangelicals. (2010). *By Their Fruit*. Retrieved December 30, 2013, from <http://www.acceptingevangelicals.org/stories/chapter1/>

<sup>11</sup> House of Bishops. (2013). *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*. London: Church House Publishing, pp. 176ff.

---

The **Revd Benny Hazlehurst** is a husband, father, priest in the Church of England and prison chaplain. He is also a founder member of Accepting Evangelicals, an open network of Evangelical Christians 'who believe the time has come to move towards the acceptance of faithful, loving same-sex partnerships at every level of church life, and the development of a positive Christian ethic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people'.