

4.2 A challenge to unity: same-sex relationships as an issue in theology and human sexuality

Overview: This is a lengthy read but the issues under consideration are many and various. This is a carefully nuanced document because the sensitivities felt on different sides of the argument are real and intense. The title, "A challenge to unity", acknowledges both the strength of feeling which has already been expressed over same-sex relationships as an issue in theology and human sexuality and the continuing difficulties which will not admit a simple resolution. However, the report does more than investigate opposing stances of a controversy - and indeed would not wish to imply that there are only two sides to this. Rather, it seeks to articulate something of the range of differing views and at the same time to discern what may yet be said in a common Christian understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves. The process of working through these issues was a blessing, if it was at times also painful: this would be the testimony of the Working Group, and it is hoped that it will likewise be a positive experience for those who read and study what follows here.

4.3 The Context of the Debate

4.3.1 Sex and sexuality have always been subjects of interest and concern to the church. The last few decades, however, have seen a particular focus on a variety of areas within sexuality. Approaches in society to sex and sexuality have changed markedly over recent decades, and churches have also looked closely at their doctrine and practice in this part of human life. In particular, questions around homosexuality have been debated both in secular and Christian arenas. Christians have taken different positions within many of these debates, and churches have faced internal and inter-church conflict over issues of human sexuality. At times these conflicts have threatened the unity of certain churches. It is important to recognise that these sexual issues are not the most fundamental theological concerns which the church should have, although they may be the most insistent at this time. But neither are these debates arcane: sex and sexuality are central parts of human life, and thus part of the Christian's response to the grace of God. Sanctification – the process in which, by the grace of God, the Christian takes on holiness – involves our sexual activity intrinsic to our living.

Recent history of debate

4.3.2 In 1994, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland gave serious attention to two reports on sexuality. The Board of Social Responsibility presented a report on "Human Sexuality", placing questions of sexuality for people with learning disabilities and physical disabilities, elderly people, and homosexuality within the contexts of human sciences and Scripture. The report recognised that members of the Church of Scotland interpret Scripture in a variety of different ways, and in approaching homosexuality come to a number of different conclusions. It is recorded that a minority of three Board members dissented from the report, with reasons given by one, namely that the report fails to locate sexuality in our fallen nature, that it lacks a section on spiritual development and that it fails to proclaim a redeemed sexuality.

4.3.3 The other report of 1994 was a second part to the Panel on Doctrine's reporting on the theology of marriage. This covered a range of questions around

marriage, including scriptural interpretation, societal change, heterosexual relationships other than marriage, same sex relationships and “ministerial affirmations” of such relationships. The report concluded, amongst other things, that cohabiting couples, whether heterosexual or homosexual, may well display all the marks of loving, faithful and committed partnership, and should not be thought sinful. While its Working Party was unanimous, the Panel on Doctrine as a whole was not, and six members signed a dissent from this report on the theology of marriage, stating that the report gives too much uncritical weight to present societal trends, misunderstands the nature of scriptural authority, and, in particular, underplays the complementarity of male and female in Scripture and creation.

4.3.4 The General Assembly of 1994 did not come to a view as to which of these reports better expressed the mind of the church. It allowed both to be received as the basis for further consideration and debate. The Panel on Doctrine’s report had advocated a process by which the Church at every level would engage with the difficult questions it had raised and the following year saw a study booklet, *Marriage Today?*, produced by representatives of the Panel on Doctrine, the Board of Social Responsibility and the Board of Parish Education, which drew on the Panel’s report to help church members and others think through the various contemporary debates in sex and marriage, laying out different perspectives. Since that time, the Kirk’s Department of Education and Board of Social Responsibility took up in 2000 the issue of homosexuality with particular reference to the Scottish Executive’s proposed change in Section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986, in relation to promotion of homosexuality in schools. The report recognised the diversity of views within the church on the proposed legislative change, but advocated the reaffirmation of the foundational nature of marriage.¹

4.3.5 In 2004, some ten years on from its report on marriage the Panel on Doctrine began again to take up these questions, and a Working Group on issues in human sexuality was formed, which in 2005 the Mission and Discipleship Council invited to encourage and support “continuing theological reflection on sexuality, as always in the light of Scripture, our tradition and the particular circumstances of today’s world”. This Group, while composed of people of deep theological convictions, did not begin with any preconceptions as to the outcomes, nor necessarily anticipated unanimity. Nevertheless it was and is hoped that the Kirk will benefit from theological reflection which lays out arguments with justice, reason and charity, attempting to move beyond some of the occasionally arid positioning of the popular debates. While efforts have been made to keep the material presented here within bounds, such a reflection cannot be briefly expressed if the whole area of discussion is to be fairly reported.

4.3.6 During 2005, quite separately, the Legal Questions Committee began to give consideration to issues arising from the introduction of Civil Partnership legislation by the government. It invited the General Assembly of 2006 to declare that ministers and deacons who conduct services marking such civil partnerships do not commit a disciplinary offence; further that no minister or deacon can be

¹ Reference was made further to the fact that the General Assembly of 1994, in making no new decisions, did not replace the view of the 1984 General Assembly that “the practice of homosexual acts is contrary to God’s will for humankind”.

compelled to conduct such a service; and finally that an officiating minister or deacon who takes a service which the parish minister has declined to conduct does not intrude in the other's parish.

4.3.7 This proposed legislation proved both divisive and galvanising in the Church of Scotland. The divided Panel on Doctrine of 1994 was reflected twelve years later in a divided national church, on similar questions, and with many of the same positions in the debate, although both changes in civil society and legislation, and theological developments, mean that the debate cannot be assumed to be in the identical place it was before. Before and following the 2006 Assembly, commissioners and others were encouraged by a variety of affinity groups to consider arguments from Scripture, reason and experience on the proper Christian approach to homosexuality. Many people have recently spoken freely on homosexuality, a subject perhaps important in their lives on which they felt unable to speak before. Presbyteries have considered the legislation under the Barrier Act, where the votes went against it.

4.3.8 While the Church of Scotland has had its debates, many churches elsewhere in the world, some near at hand, others more distant, have likewise been engaging on issues of human sexuality. Such engagements have had various points of focus, depending on local context and tradition, and such reports as are available make for profitable reading. Sometimes matters have come to a head through voting at synods and assemblies, but this has not been the only track pursued. Even where decision-making has been taken up, the structures by which communion is maintained within the various churches vary, and where there has been intense controversy, these have rightly been the subject of scrutiny. And notably in the World Council of Churches, serious attempts have been made in recent years at open-ended discussion which has been greatly appreciated.²

4.4 Aim of the Report

4.4.1 The Mission and Discipleship Council believes that the Church would be helped by sustained theological reflection about broader questions of human sexuality. Of fundamental importance is that Christians, of widely differing opinions, are nevertheless one in Christ, bound together by his Spirit, part of his body, the church. The church in general and the Church of Scotland in particular is finding that consideration of certain questions in human sexuality is currently contributing to conflict within the church. There are multiple tensions surrounding attitudes to and pastoral practice concerning aspects of our sexual lives. We believe that God speaks to the church, and that we as church have the essential though difficult calling of listening to God's word, and following Jesus in his way, truth and life. And so the Council offers the following report as a resource to the Church at this time. Given the timescale of recent work, the report focuses principally on the issue of same-sex relationships, though not specifically in relation to the matter relating to civil partnerships which was sent down under the Barrier Act from the General Assembly of 2006. The report is not intended as the last word on the subject. Although

² Some of the reports of other churches have been printed, while others are available only via the worldwide web. The "ecumenical conversation" facilitated within the World Council of Churches took place both in the central committee meeting of February 2005 and at the Porto Alegre Assembly in February 2006 and was extensively reported in web news.

Presbyteries have decided on the particular question they were asked, different understandings will remain within the Church of Scotland on homosexuality and homosexual practice³, as will tensions arising from sharply differing views. There is a continuing need for prayerful theological discernment.

4.4.2 In offering a report which mainly addresses questions around homosexuality, the Council intends, in view of the range of other important topics in human sexuality, that the Working Group might carry on its studies into these other areas, some of them alluded to all too briefly in what follows.

4.5 Process

4.5.1 Since 2004, the Working Group has read up on, listened to and discussed various questions in human sexuality. A breadth of opinion is represented within the Group's fellowship as members of the body of Christ.⁴ As a part of the Church charged with reflecting on these issues, the Group has opened itself to Scripture, theology and experience. A central aspect of the task has been for members, through reflection and debate, to understand their own and others' views more clearly. In discussion, members have continually forced each other to articulate views clearly, with the reasons for those views and the presuppositions behind them. Members have been willing to recognise the existence of reason, coherence and a desire for Christian integrity in positions they do not themselves hold. A major element in this process was a two-day residential seminar which provided time for extended theological reflection and a deepening of relationships within the Group that have helped members to hear more clearly what others say. The Group also benefited from the insights of a panel of external readers once this report was in draft form.

4.5.2 Within the focus on same-sex relationships, the Group has listened to gay and lesbian Christians, including Church of Scotland ministers, who have expressed a range of perspectives. It has overheard something of the questions around homosexuality in which academics are interested, often very different from the church's preoccupations. It has listened to testimonies which have led members to recognise pastorally insensitive – indeed, sinful – attitudes on the part of the Church. There has perhaps been very little in the way of individuals radically changing their views, but there has been an appreciation that opposite views are not by definition morally or spiritually deficient: rather, the theological debate is a *Christian* theological debate. The dependence upon the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit is patent amongst people of all views, and is present on all sides of the debate. Debates have been friendly, convivial, frank, pointed, and laced with humour. The Group has shared communion together, prayed and sung together, studied the Bible

³ A note on terminology: although defining terms is always potentially to import conclusions into the debate itself, it may be thought useful to know the rules of thumb by which the report is written. By "homosexuality" can be meant both the phenomenon of same-sex attraction and sexual (genital) activity. The report distinguishes between homosexual activity (or practice or behaviour) and a homosexual orientation (or inclination). When same-sex sexual activity, as opposed to orientation in itself, is meant, the report endeavours to make that clear. "Gay" and "lesbian" are occasionally used as adjectives, synonymously with "homosexual", and do not by themselves imply sexual practice.

⁴ Since the question has been raised variously, it should be noted that members of the working group were not obliged to declare their own sexuality.

together, often through sharp disagreements, and eaten together. It is hoped that this small Group, a broad theological spectrum but ultimately and practically one in Christ, may be a small but hopeful model for the National Church.

4.6 Sexuality in Christian Understanding

4.6.1 Confined issues within human sexuality can only be understood in the context of Christian reflection on human sexuality more generally. It may be impossible here to attempt more than a brief mention of that wider context, but it is an important situating of the more developed consideration in this report of same-sex desire, orientation and sexual activity.

4.6.2 That human beings are sexual is a multi-faceted fact of our existence. We are male and female. We have sexual organs. We experience desire for sexual satisfaction. We find other people attractive. A potential outcome of sexual intercourse between men and women is conception. Sex is necessary to the procreation of the human species. Sex, although it can and does take place between strangers, or between people with little feeling for one another, is found to be an aspect of loving, an activity which deepens love between people, giving expression to desire, affection, tenderness and mutual togetherness.

4.6.3 Christians recognise that sexuality, essential to the procreation of the human species, is part of God's creative purpose. Rather than seeking to trivialize sexuality, Christian approaches acknowledge the fundamental importance of sexuality to our biology, our closest relationships, family life, and ordering of society. While those outside the church may consider the church to be obsessed with questions of sexuality, the church may respond that given the central nature of sexuality for so much in life, a proper Christian approach must not treat it lightly. We belong to a world being redeemed in Christ, and our actions, by the grace of God, must be considered not as some adjunct to our faith but as the arena in which our faith is lived, our redemption is expressed. For the Christian to profess "Jesus is Lord" means to submit every facet of existence to that Lordship, mind, spirit and body. It is part of the church's mission to bring the values of Christ's kingdom – such as love, holiness, justice, selflessness – to bear on every part of human existence, sexuality at least as much as any other.

4.6.4 Sexual intercourse has conventionally been seen as appropriate in a context where it is open to the possibility of conception, and where the two partners to the sexual act would as parents bring up the child. Clearly, the church's view of marriage is closely connected with this basic understanding of the role of sexuality, though it has also valued its place in cementing intimacy and mutual belonging between husband and wife. A marriage may be defined essentially as the exclusive relationship between a man and woman in which each is faithful to the other, and which forms a union, a family unit in which any children are brought up.

4.6.5 This said, marriage and understandings of sexuality have undergone much development in the history of Christian thought. Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant models have differed and modified over the centuries. In Western society marriage has been a central aspect of social and political relationships, not only providing a relatively stable unit for the rearing of children, but working for the uniting of families and the forming of communities. It would be an exaggeration to

say that it has been consistently a source of blessing, for in line with other modes of partnership and single living, it has in practice been open to destructive attitudes and behaviour as well as to that which has been beneficial. However, marriage as the context for sexual activity has not been merely a unit of two, one's own discrete family: marriage has been a linchpin of the ordering of wider social and geographical networks. Marriage is public.

4.6.6 It should also be recognised that there has been a range of patterns of social organisation other than marriage. Monasticism, men and women living together, sometimes with children but in any case without being married, households in which unmarried adults have played their full part have all had their place. And historically there have been shifts of thinking in regard of the rite of Christian marriage and who should have it, and where and when.

4.6.7 Homosexual acts, however, have been consistently considered in Christian tradition as sinful. The Church Fathers drew heavily on Scripture in their condemnation of homosexual behaviour, with anal intercourse being especially disapproved. Medieval thought, for example Thomas Aquinas, developed consideration of homosexual acts as being a species of lust, contrary to the natural order for human sexual relations. Ecclesiastical discipline of people engaged in homosexual behaviour in monastic life was developed in lists of offences with the degree of penance required. Reformation approaches, often emphasising the primacy of Scripture, saw no great change in the traditional condemnation of these practices. This consistent view was reflected in various patterns of societal codification of homosexuality as both sin and crime, and punishment thereof. While civil law has been changing fairly recently in some countries, there are still places where it remains a crime to engage in certain homosexual practices.

4.6.8 Twentieth and twenty-first century theological approaches to marriage and sexuality emphasise possibly even more than before how sexual activity is not only a means of procreation but also a contributor to an individual's own ends, such as pleasure, happiness, fulfilment, wisdom, generosity or a number of other ends.

4.6.9 Furthermore, there is a strong reaction in modern Christian thought away from the perception of sex as somehow inherently sinful. There has been a great deal of Christian ambivalence about our bodiliness. This has often been expressed in the elevation of the soul over against the body as the locus of human personhood, and in the appropriation of a Greek philosophical understanding of the immortality of the soul within subsequent Christian thought on life beyond death. Sex, too, has been associated with sin, perhaps foundationally in popular misreadings of Genesis. These assume that Adam and Eve covered their nakedness because it was sinful, whereas the text is clear that it is not their nakedness which is sinful, but that, having sinned in eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, that sin has caused them to be ashamed of their bodies. Sex has also been understood as inherently sinful in the influential Augustinian view that original sin was passed from one generation to the next literally through the transmission of seed. By contrast, there is a strong emphasis in contemporary Christian thought on the goodness of human bodies as part of our creaturely existence, on the essential bodiliness of the human person, on sexuality as a gift of God to creatures to be enjoyed, at least partly, for its own sake. The resurrection of the body has been held to be the principal and particularly

Christian way of understanding the life of the world to come. Nevertheless, such a positive view of human bodiliness and sex should not blind the church to the reality that sex, including sex within marriage, has furnished sites of countless examples of unjust, cruel, oppressive and violent behaviour.⁵

4.6.10 Another aspect of the contemporary Christian paradigm is as follows. Whether sexual activity is appropriate is judged by many, not principally according to whether it takes place within marriage, but whether it is good in itself. Do the sexual relationship and activity reflect the love of God: faithful, generous, spontaneous, freely given, with a passion for and delight in the other? Do the relationship and activity embody values of the redeemed community brought about in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – loving, compassionate, peaceable, honest, without trace of oppression, coercion, greed or hypocrisy? A typical approach to sexual morality along these lines would ask to what extent the triune God's faithfulness to creation, God's self-offering of love, God's delight in the other, God's granting of freedom to creation and God's loving judgment of creation are reflected in our human relationships. This may give a grounding from which to approach incest, paedophilia, sexual abuse, rape, bestiality, prostitution, promiscuity, group sex and other questionable sexual practices.

4.6.11 So in many modern Christian thinkers a model of interpersonal values has been brought to bear on the historical teaching of the church. However, there are other theological voices saying that apart from the merits of the modern interpersonal approach, there is a risk of an insufficiently developed understanding of the public nature of marriage, and of sexuality more generally. Sex is much more than one's own individual sexuality. Desire which is not narcissistic immediately involves another. And sex is also much more than a couple's relationship: for one thing, they may have children, and in many cases their sexual activity will be open to the possibility of conception. Moreover, the couple belongs to a wider network of their family and friends who share in their relationship in conversation, shared activity, support and mutual bonds of love. Even more broadly, a couple's relationship is open to the world: in the fields of law, money, public policy and work, the couple is interwoven with much wider concerns than their own relationship. Last but not least, a Christian couple is part of the body of Christ, and their relationship forms part of the fellowship of people bound together in Christ, by his redemptive life, in the outpouring of his Spirit upon his people. Their relationship, while containing elements that are properly private, is also public to the church.

4.7 Change in societal understandings

4.7.1 In Scotland, domestic and family relationships are currently undergoing a profound transformation. Fewer people are marrying, they are marrying later, they are not delaying sex until marriage, they are divorcing more frequently. Children are increasingly born outside marriage; gay and lesbian people are increasingly rearing children within established family units; and, as already stated, civil partnerships were introduced in 2005. These changes have involved a radical reappraisal of previously

⁵ Note Pope Benedict XVI's cautionary word in his first Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est": "The contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. Eros, reduced to pure 'sex', has become a commodity, a mere 'thing' to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity" (Paragraph 5).

held assumptions concerning the roles of men and women and the nature of the family unit. At a time of cultural shifts society's moral compass, while oscillating between different extremes, is generally pointing away from traditional Christian sexual ethics, namely, that sex is for marriage alone.

4.7.2 Furthermore, society seems increasingly obsessed with sexuality. This is evident in the all-pervasive presence of sexual themes in fiction, newspapers and magazines, popular music, drama, film, television and the internet; in the increasing sexualisation of the young, through magazines, advertising, and television, advocating adult, sexy styles of clothing and make-up for pre-pubescent girls and early teens; in high rates in the UK of teenage sex and pregnancy, and high rates of divorce. Although this report will not take up the issue of the increasing sexualisation of the young in our communities and portrayals in the media, it remains a strong concern.⁶

4.7.3 A particularly profound shift in recent societal mores is the perception and position of homosexuality – with indeed the very concept being a modern one.⁷ There is little consensus on the questions around the origins or causes of homosexuality. Biological science has no fixed view on why some people are attracted to members of the same sex, or both sexes, or the opposite sex. There is no clear picture as to whether genetics hold the key to homosexuality. Indeed, it is strongly disputed whether physiological causes alone are responsible for our patterns of desire. It is quite possible that, if physiological factors are central to our sexuality, they are likely to be multiple, varied and sensitive to environmental triggers; furthermore, even our physiology can be significantly affected by life experiences. The force of environmental influences on sexual orientation are also much debated. Evidence appears to indicate that there is no overwhelming cause or group of causes for homosexual preferences.

4.7.4 And so what remains unclear is whether homosexuality is largely innate to the human being, or constructed throughout life. Indeed, it may not be possible to judge between these two fields of causes (broadly nature or nurture) because it is not a dichotomy of much use in the understanding of sexuality: sexual preferences are a function perhaps both of inheritance and environment, and there is no simple model which applies across the board. Men have been having sex with men, and women with women, throughout the ages, but until the 19th century, sexual acts were not seen as determining one's sexual identity in anything like the way they are today, when, increasingly, people who desire the same sex are defined, often by themselves, as gay or lesbian or, in the case of desiring members of both sexes, bisexual.

4.7.5 There is, therefore, a range of issues in this area. Society has become familiar with the concept of a homosexual “orientation”, or “inclination”, and people use the self-descriptions rooting their sexual orientation as a fundamental part of their identity. Sexual preferences are not necessarily fixed for everyone. It may be better to say that there is a spectrum of sexual desire going from the poles of homo- to hetero-

⁶ The Board of Social Responsibility reported to the General Assembly of 1993 on Young People and the Media, concluding that children have access to pornography, and that some content in magazines for teenage girls is anything but innocuous.

⁷ “Homosexuality” as a concept was introduced in the 1860s and became popular only in the 20th century.

sexual attraction, with a majority experiencing predominantly heterosexual desire, but with many people elsewhere on the spectrum. Then indeed, not only is sexuality not confined to a few fixed points on the spectrum, but an individual's sexuality is not necessarily confined to one point on the spectrum through time. Whatever the questions over the possibility of deliberately converting from one pole to another, this does not mean that an individual's orientation cannot shift over time. Human beings are used to this, in a sense, in the way that sex drive fluctuates also.

4.7.6 Societal attitudes on homosexuality are many and varied. Alongside the openness with which the subject is discussed, and the campaigns for recognition, there continues to be hostility and prejudice, though few would now consider that homosexual people, in virtue of being homosexual, are psychologically unbalanced. Evidence suggests that homosexual people are no more likely than heterosexual people to abuse children sexually. It is equally questionable whether homosexual people are any more promiscuous than heterosexual people. It is widely believed to be impossible to change someone forcibly from a homosexual orientation. Many, perhaps most, gay men and lesbians would not wish to change their orientation. Civil law in Britain is moving towards protecting homosexuals from discrimination.

4.7.7 The church, caught up in societal change, also has to reckon with there being homosexual people, sexually active or celibate, in its midst. To make a distinction between orientation and act has been central to the approaches of many churches worldwide, particularly with reference to ordination. Homosexual orientation, as a relative given, is not seen to present the same level of challenge to the church as homosexual practice. Commonly, those who have a homosexual orientation are permitted to serve in ordained roles in the church, so long as they do not engage in homosexual acts.⁸ There are also churches, however, where there is no bar on gay men and lesbians who are sexually active being ordained to serve.

4.8 The church and power

4.8.1 The changing context, and the debate over how to respond to it, is set against a backdrop of the church having held and continuing to hold a formidable institutional power.⁹ Church attitudes to homosexuality and homosexual people are connected to complex power relations in which the church participates. The right regulation of sex has been a cultural anxiety in every place and time, and the church has been and is a voice with a certain power in the debate. This can be evidenced both positively and negatively, as Christian values and teaching are publicly both articulated and disparaged. In this time of fast-moving change in sexual patterns and norms, churches and Christian groups find it difficult to watch from the side, but feel strongly that they should say something, that their views should be heard, and that

⁸ But see the 2005 "Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders" from the Roman Catholic Church's Congregation for Catholic Education which states that the Roman Catholic Church "cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practise homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called 'gay culture'." Here it would appear that a homosexual orientation is a bar to ordination.

⁹ Some discussion of this was presented to the General Assembly by the Panel on Doctrine in 2004.

their policies towards sexual matters should be clear and correctly followed. (This report is not immune from this tendency.)

4.8.2 But while churches participate in sexuality debates, there is a newer emphasis within the churches that power is exercised through service, according to which the churches align themselves not least with the poor, weak, marginalised and alienated in society and in the world as a whole. In other words, the church increasingly identifies with people conventionally excluded from power. Part of this emphasis includes listening to the voices of gays and lesbians, especially gay and lesbian Christians. Hitherto it has been very difficult for people to speak openly in the church of homosexual desire or orientation, fearing judgment and punishment. This report plays a small part in developing this process of listening to voices from previously unheard quarters.

4.8.3 Nevertheless, it is not straightforward to say that homosexual people are vulnerable and denied access to power. Since in Western countries today, homosexuals largely have legal recognition and protection and are less likely to be subject to psychiatric misdiagnosis than was once the case, many are economically successful, and some have successfully served in political office. Acceptance of homosexual lifestyles, a nostrum of liberal Western thought, is critical of religious arguments to the contrary. However, homosexual people may still remain among the most vulnerable groups in society, facing prejudice, verbal and physical abuse, as well as a larger risk of HIV/AIDS than the heterosexual population, and probably higher rates of suicide. While public policy may be becoming more gay and lesbian-friendly, private opinion is often critical of homosexual people.

4.8.4 There is then a timely call to the church to make clear its gospel. Theological approaches to homosexuality which present gay or lesbian people as unlovable or less loved by God than any other person are unacceptable. The doctrine of salvation would not imply that they require a special redemption from sin. Without in any sense diluting the place of sin in human lives, the doctrine of creation includes humility and thankfulness for all that God has made. The commandment not to judge, all too commonly flouted in practice, has a vital place in a faith shaped by God's redemptive purpose in Jesus Christ; "embrace is grace". While Christians may view another's activity as sinful, the naming of sin is for the sake of repentance and inclusion. Rather often, it has been badly mishandled, for the sake of exclusion.¹⁰ In the church's life, there may be a full participation of homosexual people in leadership and service. Identified sexuality which is gay is not a bar in itself to baptism or to communion. Being gay or lesbian by orientation is no bar to serving God as church member, elder, reader, deacon, minister or moderator. And in pastoral care there should be no discrimination; for example, a homosexual partner should be accorded all dignity as a chief mourner on the occasion of a partner's death.

4.8.5 It is a regrettable witness that people in churches have sought to use their power in such ways as to exacerbate societal disapproval of homosexual people as people. We have been complicit in prejudice and worse. May we say to one another: I will love you as my neighbour, and if your sexuality or my sexuality prevents my loving you, then I am failing in the Christian way. All Christians are to be moved to

¹⁰ On inclusion and exclusion, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

repent of unloving attitudes, pronouncements and behaviour towards others. In a society encouragingly taken up with issues of freedom and human dignity, the church equally has a distinctive contribution to offer, and it cannot be only words. There must be action too. The church will insist that our true humanity and a glorious freedom is found in Christ and that no other marker approaches the significance of that, but this is a gospel for all people: no-one should feel themselves so unwelcome and only half-belonging as some have done.

4.9 Gay and Lesbian Experience

4.9.1 Identity matters in this conversation. While people with a predominantly heterosexual orientation may be less conscious of their self being defined by their desire for the opposite sex, the marker of sexual identity counts for many people who are not heterosexual, those who are found somewhere else on the spectrum. It arises not least because of the prejudices, difficulties and dangers that homosexual activity and lifestyles have involved. It should not be surprising that *being homosexual* looms large in self-understanding, however much we may be dismayed at tendencies in popular discourse to exaggerate the significance of sex in contemporary living. Sex is not necessarily more important in lesbians' and gay men's lives than in the lives of those who are heterosexual.

4.9.2 Sexuality is a major but only one aspect of a person's identity. Countless other aspects of self-understanding matter to people, among them their family relationships, friendships, work, interests, skills, political beliefs, musical passions, sporting allegiances, and so on. For those for whom faith commitment is a central part of their identity, *being Christian* is a large marker of identity, and perhaps increasingly so as society turns its face in other directions. Trust in God, following Jesus Christ, belonging to his Church, living out our baptism, being shaped by Scripture, participating in worship, partaking of communion – all combine to form the consciousness of being Christian. And Christian identity is more than a consciousness: it comes through one's being the object of God's redeeming love in Christ.

4.9.3 These identities will overlap. Many people identify themselves as homosexual and Christian, and they are able to maintain both these facets – both fairly life-determining facets – with integrity. But there are other people who find the integration of homosexual desire and Christian faith an immense struggle. Their lives may be marked by a sense of guilt, that they are succumbing to temptation, being disobedient, and are unworthy to belong to the church. A further factor is the extent to which people have come out, disclosing their sexuality to family, friends, colleagues and church. The Group met gay and lesbian Christians as part of their work, and heard from them how they integrate these two aspects of their identity, and relate to other people including the church. In no case had it been an entirely straightforward experience.

4.9.4 A representative of the True Freedom Trust, a gay, Christian man, spoke of his experience. For him, Scripture is clear that God does not approve of sexual activity outside marriage between a man and a woman. And so he has lived his own life according to his Christian convictions: gay by orientation, celibate in practice. While he is immensely sympathetic towards his fellow-Christians who choose to have sex with partners of the same sex, he considers that that behaviour is not obedient to

the will of God as revealed in the Bible. The True Freedom Trust has also, in the past, advocated “special friendships.” These friendships between gay and lesbian people with people of the same sex, were encouraged as a means of offering company, support, friendship and fulfilment to those denied sexual expression.¹¹

4.9.5 Then the Pastor of a Metropolitan Community Church, together with a member of that church, shared their perspectives. Like the representative from the True Freedom Trust, they describe themselves as homosexual and Christian. Unlike him, however, they argue that it is acceptable to be involved in a sexual relationship. Sexuality is such a significant part of their identity that it would be dishonest to themselves to deny its expression. To demand a celibate lifestyle of them is to demand that they be inauthentic as people. One told of her conviction that we must bring our whole selves to God, leading to her understanding that a person’s sexual orientation is the particular form in which people enjoy God’s good and generous gifts of love, relationship, sexual desire and experience. As for Scripture, she argues, we must read it critically and in conversation.

4.9.6 The Group also heard from two Church of Scotland ministers, one male, one female, who have both entered into civil partnerships with their respective partners. One of the ministers (henceforward A) described the experience of being a homosexual as follows: “I don’t think I am making a choice. I am merely being the person God created me to be... On recognition and acceptance of my sexuality it felt like another part of the jigsaw that makes up my life had been put in place.... My sexuality is part of me as integral as my eye colour and my blood group.” In terms of ministry, A regrets the secrecy which A feels is still necessary, and is deeply conscious of the range of approaches A feels to homosexuality within the church, from acceptance through toleration to condemnation. For A and A’s partner, entering a civil partnership was an outward sign of their commitment to each other. A concluded: “For both of us as Christian people we wanted to honour God and place God at the centre of our relationship. For us this is a matter of bringing integrity into our faith and life.”

4.9.7 A second Church of Scotland minister (henceforward B) described life before and for the first decade of ministry as a celibate of homosexual orientation. But from that point onwards B has been in a sexual relationship. B came to believe that such a relationship was acceptable through an appreciation that if scriptural texts constitute a rule that forbid physical expression of homosexual love, then it is a rule that admits of exceptions. For B, a guiding principle must be harm: if sexual activity

¹¹ See, e.g., Martin Hallett, “Truth and Love in Our Sexual Feelings,” in Timothy Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 133-4. “Liberty Christian Ministries” in Australia has similarly been set up for the sake of lesbian and gay Christians – C. Keane (ed.), *What some of you were* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2001). Note also William Still’s suggestion: “Perhaps frustrated Christian counsellors should find it in their hearts to pray that it might be in the divine will for such people to find someone with whom a friendship can be formed and a level of association maintained which helps in bearing each other’s burden in Christ, according to Christ’s rules of purity.” William Still, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Problems of our Fallen Sexuality,” in David Searle, ed., *Truth and Love in a Sexually Disordered World* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2006), 64.

does no harm, then perhaps it cannot be wrong.¹² B further commented that it had not been easy as a homosexual minister, both when celibate and when not, because of secrecy and the fear of being exposed publicly.

4.9.8 Authenticity, or wholeness, is at the heart of these experiences. Gay and lesbian Christians who choose celibacy feel it is the only Christian approach they may take. None of the following ways of life – a same sex partnership, or casual sexual encounters, or a marriage which is more a sham than a source of fulfilment – would be authentically Christian. They involve unfaithfulness to Scripture, to God and to other human beings. Gay and lesbian Christians who choose a long-term partnership on the other hand also feel that that is the authentic path for their life. Neither celibacy nor a partnership in which there is no sexual fulfilment allows for the proper expression of their sexuality – God-given as they see it.

4.9.9 It is clear that once one starts to consider the recent history of debate on sexuality in Christian tradition, homosexuality, change in societal perspectives, the relationship between the church and power, and the identities of gay and lesbian Christians, one quickly begins to recognise the importance of interpretation – of tradition, experience, and of Scripture. So let us turn to matters of interpretation, and in particular Scripture. How should Christians live, with particular reference to sex and sexuality, as people of the book?

4.10 The Interpretation of Scripture

4.10.1 Matters of interpretation: changing approaches

If the church wishes seriously to engage with the issues of homosexuality, and consider whether its position on sex outside the bonds of marriage and involving those of the same gender, held over centuries with little alteration, is now open to revision, it needs to understand both how it is possible and when it is correct to change its view on ethical issues. Christianity is far from an unchanging monolith, taking different forms relative to cultures across place and time; language, scientific, social and political world-views have interacted with it, and there have been prophetic voices. The modifying of doctrines, beliefs, practices, rules and norms takes account of experiences in changing circumstances and environments. The tradition has been reviewed with different emphases brought out, as new arguments were articulated, heard and gained ground, and as the scriptural witness was interpreted influentially in once implausible ways.

4.10.2 Instances here would be the shifts of thought in regard to slavery, democracy, universal suffrage, artificial contraception, and debate over sacraments and ministries, divorce and remarriage, the arts, other religions, warfare, Sabbath-day observance and many other important areas. Where changes have occurred, the church has often left behind previously dominant approaches to the issue at hand, setting aside particular readings of Scripture which no longer appear to be compelling, often discerning in Scripture itself a critique of the earlier view. Yet in the course of the change, those who oppose the change are often hurt by the letting go of accepted

¹² No direct harm, perhaps, but recall the earlier comment (1.6.4) that sexual activity is not merely private, but belongs to wider spheres, with consequences for other people and groups, including the church.

interpretations and positions. It is as the years pass that it often becomes clearer how significant the shift was.

4.10.3 Within the church today, there are many who would argue that similar principles which led forebears to argue for the incompatibility of slavery with Christianity, or for the ordination of women, apply in regard of the case of gay and lesbian people and their sexual practice. It would be an ethical change following from similar emphases in Scripture, related arguments on the grounds of justice and evidence from the experience of Christians who belong to the group in question. But for others, many of whom would accept, say, the ordination of women, the issues of homosexuality are not similar. The witness of Scripture and tradition, and the character of the church in which we are called to obedient discipleship, prevent a shift in the traditional view.

4.11 The interpretation of Scripture

4.11.1 How do we read the Bible? When the General Assembly heard the 1994 report on marriage from the Panel on Doctrine, which proved so divisive within the Panel, one consequence was that the Panel was sent back to explore the issue of Biblical interpretation. In 1998, the Panel's report entitled *The Interpretation of Scripture* was presented to the General Assembly. The Report begins from the conviction that the Bible is authoritative for Christian life and the church. But it is clear as soon as two readers of Scripture discuss a passage that interpretations differ, no matter that both acknowledge scriptural authority. And so the Report offered 12 guidelines under three headings for the interpretation of Scripture, as follows:

Be attentive

Determine what kind of passage you are reading and read to gain a sense of the whole.

Be aware that different kinds of texts make different kinds of claims.

Locate the passage in the overall story-line of Scripture.

Be aware of how one text may allude to, repeat, fulfil or modify another.

Be open

Acknowledge your prejudices and presuppositions.

Determine what the authors could have meant in the original context.

Become familiar with the history of biblical interpretation.

Relate difficult passages to simpler ones.

Be obedient

Read in the believing community.

Distinguish the descriptive from the prescriptive.

Prayerfully perform the Scriptures.

Use Scripture to form, inform and reform your heart, mind and imagination.

4.11.2 In the Group's discussion of scriptural passages and themes, a number of these guidelines came into play, and the Council advocates their use in the sexuality debate as elsewhere. Of course, members' interpretations still differ. Members have their own prejudices and presuppositions. They disagree as to the particular genre to which certain passages should belong in contemporary application. Most fundamentally, the descriptive is distinguished from the prescriptive in different places: for some readers, a narrative describes the understanding of the people of God at that time, and while its principle may apply today, its detail is not applicable. For

others, the very same chapters are prescriptive, and offer a sure guide to the will of God for human society today. The Group did not find (nor is there, perhaps) a failsafe way of deciding between these divergent approaches to certain crucial passages and themes in the Bible. But it was learnt that a more traditional reader of Scripture does not necessarily ignore genre, historical context, and the history of interpretation. And awareness came that a less traditional interpreter does not necessarily neglect what the authors meant in the original context, the claims made on the reader, and the possibility that a passage is prescriptive.¹³

4.11.3 In 1998, the Assembly resolved to “affirm the conclusion drawn in the Report that, drawing from a common Gospel, there is a variety of valid ways of interpreting Scripture, always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” *Valid* is a slippery word, but each member of the Group would agree that, besides particularly fruitful approaches to scriptural interpretation which they favour, other approaches also may have a coherence and integrity.

4.11.4 What is not always so clear in the debate over scriptural interpretation is the extent to which Scripture is one element among many making up one’s theological convictions and response to any issue. Theology reflects on Scripture. But theology is also formed by our own individual experience and that of the people of God as a whole, in life and liturgy. Furthermore, tradition plays a significant role in our development of Christian approaches. (This report has already alluded to a number of previous reports to the General Assembly, for example.) And when we come to a view on theological subjects, we employ our reason. While various theological approaches emphasise one or more of these sources over others, all theological approaches maintain some form of balance or even tension between them. In approaching the questions around homosexuality, we should be conscious in any argument as to what the sources are, what is privileged, and what is neglected. In the distinctive views taken by the representatives of the True Freedom Trust and Metropolitan Community Church laid out above, one might categorise that debate as marked by different sets of principles shaping the integration of Scripture, experience and reason in their theological thought.

4.11.5 However, Christians should be careful not to assume that those with whom they disagree theologically are neglecting a resource precious to themselves. Revisionists should not assume that traditionalists downplay experience, nor should more traditional interpreters imagine that revisionists are not led by Scripture. Different approaches shape their emphasis of interpretation – of Scripture, tradition, experience – differently.

The Reformed tradition of which the Church of Scotland is a part holds Scripture to be authoritative. But acknowledging the authority of Scripture does not mean that all Christians treat that authority in the same way in their lives. A further question then in these matters of interpretation is what is the relationship between scriptural

¹³ The terms commonly used for approaches to Scripture and theology – “conservative” and “liberal” – have been avoided as potentially misleading, particularly given the technical sense that “liberal” has in the history of theology. Although the issue of homosexuality, as with theological debate generally, does not fall neatly into two parties, the terms “traditional” and “revisionist” are used in the report to describe those of more and less traditional views respectively.

understanding and life? What in Scripture is authoritative? For many who would consider themselves conventional Christians in the mainstream of historical understanding, they may reply straightforwardly that they do what the Bible commands, and turn away from what the Bible rejects, so far as they are able by the grace of God. They love their neighbour. They do not commit adultery. But they recognise that not all prescriptions in Scripture are prescriptive today. As for those who profess to live by the authority of Scripture but in their lives have moved away from scriptural norms on sexuality, the answer often involves what they consider to be overarching principles of God's relationship to creation which Scripture reflects. They obey, so far as they are able by the grace of God, the loving openness of God, faithfulness within partnership, compassion for the weak, solidarity with the vulnerable. Note that these attitudes to the authority of Scripture are not mutually exclusive: one may live a Christian life in broad obedience to a general principle of God's love, but on occasion try to fulfil a specific word of Scripture.

4.11.7 For all who take Scripture as authoritative, comparable questions will arise. A revisionist interpreter may be asked why scriptural prohibitions on homosexual practice are not regarded as decisive, while statements on, for instance, social justice are. Similarly, a more traditional interpreter may be asked why scriptural prohibitions on homosexuality are regarded as decisive, while statements, for instance, prohibiting women's leadership or the re-marriage of divorcees might not be. Why are some statements defined as universally normative and others seen as contextually specific? Slippery-slope arguments cannot be applied only to one side.

4.12 The status of the differences

4.12.1 But perhaps the most difficult tension in matters of interpretation is: just how important is this issue anyway? What is at stake in holding different approaches to the interpretation of Scripture on matters of sexual behaviour? After all, a church may disagree on countless matters. Is communion better served in individual glasses or a common cup? Should clergy wear vestments? Is private baptism at home acceptable? Some people feel strongly about these: yet they do not threaten to divide churches down the middle today. Why is the church's doctrine as to whom we may have sex with so church-dividing? The answer seems to be twofold. First, the issue has typically been seen by Christians as central to the gospel, in that which practices are appropriate to the follower of Christ arise out of an irreducible core of Christian belief. No church may expect every member to have identical beliefs, but a church may legitimately ask of its members subscription to certain non-negotiable items of faith. And questions of love, faithfulness and sexual activity form, for many, an area of Christian practice following necessarily from beliefs which belongs to this category. It seems to many that Scripture is so clear that the male-female relationship is the only God-approved environment for sexual expression that for a church to countenance services marking a same-sex partnership cuts right at the heart of Christian discipleship.

4.12.2 The second reason why homosexuality is so difficult an issue is implied in the first. The seeming clarity of Scripture on the importance and uniqueness of the male-female relationship and in particular marriage as the context for sex, which is the very vehicle for family life and continuation of humanity, makes the possible sanctioning of same-sex blessings a sign for many of a wholly new and deficient attitude to Scripture. Scripture does not decide for us what are the right vessels for

communion wine, or what Christian ministers should wear, or where baptism must take place. But Scripture does appear to be consistent that God approves of sexual union between a man and a woman, and that within marriage. The issue may then be paraphrased as defined by some as follows: *this is not about homosexuality; it is about many in the church deliberately setting aside the Bible's teaching, a teaching which expresses clearly the will of God.*

4.12.3 Similarly, there are some who believe that a revisionist approach to homosexual orientation and practice follows from the essential core of Christian belief, based in Scripture, which informs theological reflection on experience, from which emerge principles of God's love, and openness to the marginalised. It is not that the norms of contemporary culture lead the church to dispense with Scripture, but rather that the witness of Scripture itself leads to a understanding of God which involves re-evaluation of traditional interpretations and patterns of Christian teaching on homosexual activity.

4.12.4 Others may see this issue as important but would insist on an important distinction between the irreducible core of belief and practical conclusions for this aspect of Christian living. In this category are people who think homosexuality is an acceptable Christian lifestyle and those who do not: what they have in common is the view that the question is a non-essential part of Christian belief. In other words, they are prepared to agree to disagree.

4.12.5 So the debate is asymmetric: for some it is about the very nature of the church we belong to; for others it is a difference in an important but not central matter. This makes finding a way of managing these differences all the harder. One can allow freedom of pastoral conscience to the colleague who insists on baptising children in their living-rooms, while privately grumbling that it ought to be in face of the congregation. But few would argue that such a practice is a deliberate disobeying of the clear will of God expressed in the Bible. It is a difference, stemming from pastoral, traditional and scriptural concerns, but remains a manageable difference. But in the case of an asymmetrical difference such as homosexuality, "freedom of pastoral conscience" appears to many to be an unacceptable way of managing the difference.

4.12.6 The Group's hope is that in recognising the reason this issue is so divisive, and articulating the asymmetric nature of the dispute, the Church is better able to find a way to manage our difference. There is a tension between which items of Christian doctrine and practice are necessary to our Church's definition and calling, and those on which there may legitimately be pastoral freedom. As long as that tension is real and acute, the Church must not fail in its Christian calling of love, forbearance, patience and an eagerness for unity.

4.13 Biblical readings (i)

4.13.1 Given the authority of Scripture for the church, it is essential that Christians learn to listen to Scripture on its own terms. We tend to come to Scripture not only with preconceived ideas as to the answers, seeking texts to support our position, but indeed also with pre-formed questions. We interrogate the Bible with ethical questions such as "Is this lawful?" However, it is necessary that we view Scripture not simply as a witness to question, but as the authority that questions us.

When asked “Is it lawful?” rarely did Jesus respond other than to question the assumptions, motives, and limited worldview that produced the question in the first place – and to call his interrogator to a fuller discipleship. Naturally, the church cannot avoid assessing the scriptural evidence being appealed to in this debate, but this is guided by the conviction that proof-texts alone would be a poor way of thinking through these matters.

4.13.2 Although this Report speaks throughout of sexuality and homosexuality, clearly these are not terms found in the Bible. Yet, as discussed immediately below, there are many sexual themes explored in Scripture, including the relationship between male and female, marriage, the body, conception, love and desire, adultery, divorce, and certain sexual practices. If contemporary presentation of these issues tends to use the concepts of sexuality, homosexuality and orientation, the church should be careful to recognise that Scripture approaches the issues in different ways.

4.13.3 A central narrative for the traditional understanding of human sexual relations is Genesis 1-3. These early chapters of Genesis are seen as establishing the parameters of biblical sexuality and becoming the pattern for God’s covenant relationship with God’s people, and Christ with the church. Humankind is created, and is created in God’s image, and this image is in the two sexes:

God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27¹⁴)

In Genesis 2, this insight is deepened with words about sexual union between the two sexes:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to
his wife, and they become one flesh. (Gen 2:24)

Strongly implied here is that the sexual relationship between a husband and wife is a good relationship, one which, inaugurated before the serpent’s temptation and human disobedience of God, is innocent. In becoming one flesh, this union appears to be marked by intense mutuality.

4.13.4 Genesis 3 lays out the temptation, the first sin and its consequences, which include drawing sexuality within the consequences of fallenness – this is why Adam and Eve are ashamed of their nakedness. The central thrust of Scripture thereafter – Law, wisdom, prophecy, incarnation, cross and resurrection – is the account of God’s redemptive activity in and for creation. And infused throughout is hope for an ultimate consummation of creation, beyond even the goodness of Eden.

4.13.5 Throughout the Old Testament, story after story describes the making of marriages, the birth (often after many years of childlessness) of children, and the

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

complicated relationships between spouses and between parents and children. Marriage is rarely romanticised, but nor is it relativised to any great extent. It is presented as an imperfect but nevertheless appropriate context for the faithful response of women and men to God's law. Indeed, in Hosea, marriage is the supreme image for the love and faithfulness of God to God's people. Song of Songs, in celebrating human desire and beauty, contains some of world's finest love poetry.

4.13.6 It is in this context, according to those who advocate a more traditional approach, that the occasional Old Testament references to homosexuality should be understood. They fall into place as examples of human sexual practice which lie sinfully outside the God-given complementarity of men and women, which exemplify indeed the fallenness of humanity, and which point to the redemption both wrought in the present and hoped for in the end. In Genesis 19, God destroys Sodom, a city in which the men threatened to rape two angels they took to be men. In what is known as the Holiness Code, we read according to Leviticus 18:22, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Later, in Leviticus 20:13, a punishment is included: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." In Deuteronomy 23:17-18, temple prostitution involving both sexes is condemned: "None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute. 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."

4.13.7 In the New Testament, Christological considerations govern instruction. The Corinthian Christians were "washed, justified and sanctified" in Christ (1 Cor 6:11), and incorporated into the holy people of God. What Christians do follows from who they are. And so, as sexuality and marriage are discussed in the New Testament, the questions for Jesus and the writers are as follows: What is the kingdom of God like? How does the disciple best live for the kingdom? How do we relate to each other in Christ? What must I do to be saved? How should I live in the last days? The text is not a moral treatise, is not abstract, and emerged partly out of specific controversies of the early Christian communities.

4.13.8 There is no reference to homosexual activity in the Gospels. Nevertheless, Jesus does speak of sexual situations. In response to questions concerning divorce, Jesus appeals to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, and reaffirms that the Creator's will is for the life-long inviolate union of husband and wife. However, while the concern of the Pharisees is with the ethical question "What is permitted?" Jesus' concern is continually with how the disciple is best to live in the light of the Kingdom. The answer is always a radical surrender of the self (and not least the sexual self) to the demands of the Kingdom. Not only adultery, but lust itself is to be eschewed. Divorce is either prohibited (Mark 10:9) or restricted (Matthew 19:9). And in response to the disciples' question "Is it better not to marry?" Jesus offers the eunuch as a model for Kingdom living "for those who can accept it" (Matthew 19:10-12). While Christians typically ask ethical questions about the limits to be placed on our desire for self-fulfilment and expression, the agenda of the Gospels is radical self-denial – a critique that should be heard by heterosexual and homosexual Christians alike.

4.13.9 The other side of this counsel of perfection and self-denial is seen in Jesus' attitude of grace to those who are broken, and not least sexually broken, for example, the haemorrhaging woman, the sinful woman who anoints Jesus, the Samaritan woman met at the well, and the woman caught in the act of adultery. Even at the risk of his own reputation, he repeatedly reaches to those stigmatised by their experience of brokenness. The kingdom is open above all to such as these, so that the tax gatherer and the prostitute are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of the respectable (Matthew 21:31-32). This is a grace which is both accepting and transforming. Forgiveness and healing are found in the call to self-denying discipleship. While Jesus does not condemn, he nevertheless invites the sinner to "go and sin no more". A theology of cheap grace, which would accommodate brokenness without a call to a new life of discipleship, should not be proclaimed.

4.13.10 Moreover, the Gospels also critique any division between "fallen" and "righteous" humanity. Those who see themselves as "respectable" are to recognize that they too are broken and in need of forgiveness. That recognition is a precondition of receiving grace and entering the Kingdom. Those that do not commit adultery must recognize their lust. Those that would condemn immorality in others must recognize that they are not without sin (John 8:7). Any theology of sexuality worthy of the name "Christian" must begin by considering the need for every believer to acknowledge brokenness, and so to know about repentance and grace.

4.13.11 Paul, as do the Gospels, assumes the goodness of the Creator and the order of creation. Yet, this creation, and in particular humanity, has been corrupted by sin. For Paul, corruption involves not just wrong human choices, but also that the human will and indeed the whole order of nature, has fallen from the Creator's intention. However, in Christ, new creation has begun – and this work of new creation is to be embodied in the Church. Christians are called to live as holy people, called out of a corrupt humanity to exist (as with Israel) in contradistinction to gentile society. This holy living pervades every aspect of the Christian's existence: lifestyle, speech, relationships, and sexual behaviour. For Paul, the Lordship of Christ involves our bodies: the body is for the Lord and not for immorality; it is the Temple of the Holy Spirit; we must glorify God in the body (1 Cor. 6:12-20). Sexual behaviour must be seen in this context.

4.13.12 As for marriage, Paul affirms that it is a good option for Christians, not to be denied, and the only permissible place for sexual relationships. Nevertheless, marriage was seen by Paul as an impediment to the follower of Jesus in an undivided concern for the things of the Lord, and so he commends celibacy. Such a calling follows from the Christian's fundamental relationship with the risen Lord, which questions the then traditional religious imperatives – to marry, and to bear children.

4.13.13 Marriage has a further significance in the New Testament as a fundamental image of Christ's relationship with the church. For Paul, the love of a husband for wife may mirror Christ's love for the church (Ephesians 5. 21-33), and Revelation envisages the marriage supper of the Lamb and the church (Revelation 19:6-10). The weight of such accounts manifest a high regard for the institution of marriage, consonant with earlier prophetic thought.

4.13.14 In the question of homosexual behaviour, likewise there are clear echoes in New Testament letters of the Old Testament. Paul lists those who will not inherit the kingdom of God: “Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers” (I Cor 6:9-10). A further list of unholy and profane includes sodomites (1 Tim 1:10). Jude writes that Sodom and Gomorrah “indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust” (Jude 7).

4.13.15 The central text discussed in much of the literature is Romans 1:18-32. According to Paul, humanity’s deliberate rejection of a knowledge of the Creator God, available to it from nature, leads to a descent into idolatry and is the root cause of a disordered and degenerate world. The consequence of this wilful rebellion is that God “gives up” humanity to unnatural sexual immorality and other vices. Creation is corrupted, in both its mindset and behaviour. The key verses are as follows:

For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their woman exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passions for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done (Rom 1:26-28).

The passage attributes homosexual acts (including the only reference to lesbian acts in the Bible) to a general disordering of creation caused by the fallenness of human nature, perhaps homosexual acts being for Paul one of the most visible examples of the disordering of creation, and one that runs counter to the apparent foundational ordering of human creation.

4.13.16 Care must be taken here. We could imagine inter-testamental Judaism using thoughts like those in Romans 1 to define a righteous “us” as against an immoral “them”. But that is not Paul’s intention in this text. Indeed the whole thrust of Romans 1-3 is that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), so that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all humanity. The mention of homosexual acts serves to demonstrate the fallenness of all humanity rather than to single out any subsection as particularly depraved or condemned. No one does right. This text must preclude the reader from feelings of moral superiority (or inferiority).

4.13.17 Scholars have discussed at length the exact meaning of terms used in these New Testament references to homosexual behaviour translated in the NRSV as “sodomites” and “male prostitutes”.¹⁵ Moreover there have been intriguing re-interpretations of the passage in Romans. Is it possible that those who show homosexual behaviour in Romans 1 act contrary to nature in the sense that they go against their own heterosexual natures? Some have argued so. But others point out that that interpretation seems to import into Paul a distinction between orientation and act which, as the report has already made clear, is a much more recent distinction. It

¹⁵ The translation itself of the original Greek raises challenges of interpretation.

is fair to say that that a large majority of New Testament scholars find that the text, from a starting-point of theological convictions about the Creator God and God's intention for creation, clearly and unequivocally disapproves of homosexual activity.

4.13.18 Although the Group reflects different views on what the church's attitude to homosexuality should be, there was somewhat surprise at the degree of concord reached regarding the plain reading of Scripture in the specific mentions of same-sex sexual activity. There was almost a weariness with interested readings of certain key texts, which tortuously attempt to repudiate the writer's clear intention to condemn behaviour as bad. The Bible, when it occasionally takes up the subject of same-sex activity, presents it as a wrong choice.

4.14 Readings of Scripture (ii)

4.14.1 Nevertheless, as was described above in section 2.2, there is more to scriptural interpretation than discerning the text's original meaning. Revisionists often stress a number of other factors which they believe should be considered in the interpretation of scriptural texts regarding marriage and sexual activity. Thus the contexts in which the Scriptures were written need to be recognised, with their social, political and scientific presuppositions. It is noted that much of the scriptural material is set within a context that was patriarchal, often presupposing the legitimacy of proprietorial attitudes towards women. Recognising this informs Christian understanding of marriage among many other issues. Revisionists further emphasise that those Old and New Testament texts discussed above are concerned with homosexual acts rather than the modern category of homosexual orientation, nor do they have in mind contemporary patterns of long-term same-sex partnerships. Moreover, given that homosexual behaviour is far from being a major theme in Scripture, it is suggested that traditional readings derive too much weight from occasional references.

4.14.2 On points of exegesis, it is observed that the Sodom narrative describes acts which are presented as wrong on a number of counts, even though traditional interpretations have tended to concentrate on the homosexual aspect. The scholars point out that these are also acts of sexual violence, which further betray the significant principle of hospitality.¹⁶ Furthermore, it is suggested that the prohibition on homosexual sex follows out of a thought-world which feared disorder, disharmony, impurity, uncleanness and defilement – to be distinguished today (though not then) from sin as rebellion against God.

4.14.3 More traditional interpreters are not persuaded by the implications of these considerations. They may hold that neither the lack of reference to homosexual orientation nor the rarity of scriptural references to homosexual activity means that such texts can be ignored. Furthermore, sociological interpretations of law in Scripture should be seen as secondary to the more basic understanding of Scripture as the revelation of God's will for humankind. Moreover, it cannot easily be denied that

¹⁶ According to Ezekiel, Sodom's guilt was that she had "pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49). Jude, however, as was seen in 2.6.6, writes that Sodom and Gomorrah "indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust" (Jude 7).

neither Old nor New Testament says anything explicitly in support of homosexual sex, while its pronouncements against it are unequivocal.

4.14.4 Yet despite the to and fro of argument on specific texts in Scripture on homosexual activity, it remains the case that the fundamental considerations driving more traditional approaches to homosexual behaviour is the pattern of sexual relationship laid out in their view in the first three chapters of Genesis and reaffirmed throughout the rest of the biblical witness, namely the union of a man and a woman.

4.14.5 Those who may be inclined to persuade the church to move towards the acceptance of homosexual activity will not rest content at that. They will argue that with regard to the book of Genesis, and the discovery of a pattern there which is sustained through the rest of Scripture about the union of a man and a woman, the impact of a whole range of modern questions to the biblical text is potentially considerable. From the sciences have come rather different understandings of the chronology and patterning of life on earth, and indeed the shaping of the planet itself; and in a separate vein the methods of reading Scripture, for instance via a feminist critique, would likewise raise serious and searching objections to more traditional readings. And what exactly was the Fall, if not occasioned literally by the eating of a fruit in the way recounted in the Genesis narrative? Issues of sex and sexuality are very much within the scope of these re-evaluations.

4.14.6 Revisionist approaches to Scripture also emphasize the basic theme in the New Testament of the boundary-breaking nature of the gospel. Cultural, indeed biblical, distinctions between Jew and Gentile (and perhaps to a lesser extent between men and women) are relativised, if not eradicated, by the gospel. Grace, fundamentally, is inclusive. A good example is Luke 4:16-30, when Jesus lays out how God's grace has frequently gone to outsiders – the widow of Zarephath, Naaman the Syrian – and how his mission would extend to Gentiles. Much of the New Testament wrestles with the distinction implicit in Jesus' sermon at Nazareth – between Jew and Gentile. And in time, the realization comes to the early church that Gentiles too could receive God's Spirit, that they did not need to renounce their non-Jewishness to follow Christ. The revelation is found in the words of Peter: “ ‘You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean’ ” (Acts 10:28).

4.14.7 It is certainly true that that Scriptural principles of justice and inclusiveness have in the past led the Church to go beyond (if perhaps not against) the specific instruction of Scripture. The Bible does not explicitly condemn slavery, but Christians would believe our modern abhorrence of it to be consistent with the biblical witness to God's creation of humankind, and the demand for justice towards all. Equally, our Church has relatively recently affirmed gender equality in ministry. Christians believe that they hold that position on biblical principles, even if specific texts point in other directions. Could the same type of reasoning hold ground here, even against a “plain reading” of Scripture?

4.14.8 Revisionist theologians argue that not calling anyone profane (recalling Acts 10:28) is a positive command to build something different, a new sacred order, a

community of inclusion, without victims.¹⁷ They maintain that the contemporary church cannot follow this narrative of the recognition of God's inclusive grace to Gentiles without applying it, as it has been applied afresh to slaves, black people and women in the past, to homosexual people, whom they believe have been excluded by the church from the sphere of grace.

4.14.9 A different line in the searching of the Scriptures takes up from the accounts of relationships between members of the same sex, particularly Ruth and Naomi, and David and Jonathan. Although the church has found Ruth's words to Naomi applicable to marital commitment, that relationship has also been commonly cited in church debates on homosexuality. While on the one hand the comparative rarity of models of actual marriages in the Bible which may be recommended to the faithful is noted, the closeness of the two women is underlined. The relationships of Abraham and Sarah, or Rebecca and Isaac, or David with his troubled marriages, do not furnish the poetry of intimacy found on the lips of Ruth:

Where you go, I will go;
 where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die –
 there I will be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
 and more as well,
if even death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17)

The Bible nowhere suggests that Naomi and Ruth were lesbians. Nevertheless, this partnership of mother-in-law with daughter-in-law, both widowed, surely was one of love, commitment and honour.

4.14.10 The relationship of David and Jonathan, also presented scripturally in highly exalted terms, is often cited in literature sympathetic to homosexuality. David's marital infidelity is notorious, yet "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (I Sam. 18:1-2). This love led Jonathan to make a covenant with David, giving him his robe and armour. Jonathan "took great delight in David" (I Sam 19:1), defended David to his (Jonathan's) father Saul, and spoke to Saul on David's behalf. Saul was angry: "Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness?" (I Sam 20:30) Jonathan then advises David to flee the angry Saul: at their parting they kissed and wept with each other, and swore that the Lord would be between them and their descendants for ever (I Sam 20:41-42). These two men love each other deeply, place the other above family and kinship ties, take immense risks for the other, and show emotion in their relationship. Certainly the text does not say that their relationship was sexual, but it has the hallmarks of fidelity, commitment, passion and love, which the church advocates today in marriage. Furthermore, these are hallmarks of deep friendship too, an underdeveloped theme in Christian preaching and ethics, which is taken up below in 4.16.2.3

¹⁷ See, for example, James Alison, *Living in the End Times: The last things re-imagined* (London: SPCK, 1997), 105-107.

4.14.11 Taking into consideration the emphasis on the inclusive nature of the gospel, and biblical narratives of close same-sex relationships, albeit presented as non-sexual, grounds then are found for contending that the grace of God in creation hallows relationships between men and men, and women and women, as well as women and men. That same grace is continually understood as extending beyond traditionally defined categories; Christ came for the stranger, the outsider, the outcast. And so for those moving beyond traditionalist readings, the conclusion falls into place - that despite the explicit prohibition on homosexual activity in Scripture, the witness of the Bible is to a God who loves what God makes, and hallows our generous love wherever it grows.

4.14.12 Clearly many readers of Scripture find the approach and conclusions of less traditional interpretations to be not at all persuasive. It may be tempting then to say that Scripture is not a good place from which to begin debate. But the Group remains convinced that no Christian approach to questions of sexuality – revisionist as well as traditional – can bypass the Bible. A Reformed church, in particular, in holding that Scripture is authoritative, can only find a way forward in discerning how God speaks in this matter *through* Scripture, rather than around it. Yet it is also true that Christian reflection on any hard subject cannot depend entirely on Scripture. Scripture is always interpreted, and the standpoint of the reader is inescapable. All Christians have presuppositions and these ought to be made clear in exegetical and theological conversation. Furthermore, theological consideration requires the balancing of Scripture – which may involve different calibrations for different Christians – with tradition, experience and reason. And so theological reflections on the matter at hand are now explored.

4.15 Theological Approaches

4.15.1 Natural Law

4.15.1.1 One strand of theology often invoked in the debate is a natural law approach, commonly associated with Roman Catholic thought. This approach to theology has been foundational to the historical understanding of marriage, the bearing and upbringing of children, sexual desire and activity, not only indeed in Catholic thought, but also in a great deal of Protestant and Reformed approaches. While Reformed theology stresses the authority of Scripture in theological deliberation, ideas of naturalness, complementarity of male and female, and the proper context for childrearing are also evident. Calvinist theology has been fertile ground for discussions of the place of natural law. As we have seen in the section above entitled *Sexuality in Christian Understanding*, many modern Christian thinkers have proposed quite different criteria for assessing the status of sexual practices, often allied to a critique of natural law thinking. And so no discussion of how the church should approach questions of human sexuality can ignore this consistently influential stream of thought.

4.15.1.2 This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* deals with the issue of homosexuality:

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, Tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’ [Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana*, 1975] They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. (2357)

Official Roman Catholic teaching recognises the distinction between homosexual orientation and the practice of homosexual acts; nevertheless, a homosexual orientation is still problematic. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), in a Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons in 1986, put it like this: “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered towards an intrinsic moral evil, and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.”¹⁸ In different language, the Protestant Richard Hays makes a similar point, that simply because a homosexual inclination may not be chosen does not make acting upon it moral: “The very nature of sin is that it is not freely chosen... We are in bondage to sin but still accountable to God’s righteous judgment of our actions. In light of this theological anthropology, it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary.”¹⁹

4.15.1.3 The 1986 Letter goes on to outline the theological premises which lead to these conclusions regarding homosexual orientation and acts. Since humankind is created in the image of God, male and female, the complementarity of the sexes reflects the inner unity of God. Furthermore it is by acting generously in concert with one another that the sexes co-operate with God in the transmission of life. In other words, men and women, in having sex, can produce children. And “The Church... celebrates the divine plan of the loving and life-giving union of men and woman in the sacrament of marriage.”²⁰ Only sex within marriage can be morally good. The consequences for homosexuality are as follows. Choosing someone of the same sex for sexual activity annuls the symbolism, meaning and goals of God’s sexual design. It is unnatural. It is not complementary – not a man and a woman. It cannot transmit life – since children cannot be born of the partnership. It is essentially self-indulgent. And, as the Catechism made clear, it is not merely that men’s and women’s bodies do not fit together with men and women respectively, but that affectively men do not fit with men, nor women with women. It is not love as develops in a good marriage between husband and wife. The correct course for the homosexual person thus is celibacy, sacrificing his or her own will to the will of God.

¹⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 40.

¹⁹ Richard B. Hays, “Awaiting the Redemption of our Bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality,” in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 10.

²⁰ Ratzinger, “Letter,” 41-2. See also “Deus Caritas Est,” which in discussing God’s *eros* for humankind as entirely *agape*, makes the following comment: “From the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfil its deepest purpose. Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love.” There is no mention of homosexuality in “Deus Caritas Est.”

4.15.1.4 There is a deal of opposition to this traditional theological approach. It is commonly brought out that arguments which depend on descriptions of nature, such as natural law arguments, find it difficult to get from the *is* to the *ought*. There are two sexes: *so sex ought only to be between members of the two sexes*. Male and female sexual organs fit well together: *so all other combinations ought to be avoided*. Children follow from some sex between men and women: *so all sex ought to be open to the possibility of children following*. In each of these cases, there is a hidden premise which requires separate justification. And these justifications are all questioned.

4.15.1.5 For one thing, many have asked whether too much is made of the complementarity of men and women. They see instead that if we are created male and female in the image of God, this only implies that we are created to be in relationship with each other – but without any necessity of our sexual relationships being male-female ones²¹ – and with God.²² Furthermore, there is a strong feminist critique of complementarity arguments along the lines that they reflect patriarchal thought-forms: “men and women turn out to be complementary; they fit each other socially because women occupy the space defined and left for them by men.”²³

4.15.1.6 Moreover, revisionists question whether particular sexual practices used by homosexual men and women are unnatural. An analogy is offered by Jeffrey John.²⁴ Many people, particularly people with a disability, paint with their feet: and we applaud this use of their creative gifts. Why should homosexual people not use their bodies in similarly unconventional ways when having sex? Furthermore, practices such as manual, oral and anal sex are not unique to homosexual sex.

4.15.1.7 As for the argument that homosexuality is unnatural because it is not open to the possibility of procreation, this has been steadily eroded in much Protestant theology over the past hundred years or so. In this time, the importance of sex for itself, for pleasure, for love, has been emphasised as much as its procreative function. As Rogers puts it: “The chief end of sex is not to make children of human beings, but to make children of God.”²⁵ This is paralleled by changes in society. Despite evidence that there is a lot of sex taking place, the birth rate in much of the Western world is at a historical low. Artificial methods of contraception are extremely widely used. Many couples are unable to conceive. Many couples enjoy sex when the woman is too old to bear children. Given all this unprocreative sex, homosexual sex, in not being open to the possibility of bearing children, does not seem so strange.

²¹ Robin Smith, *Living in Covenant with God and One Another* (Geneva: WCC, 1990), 31, from a 1982 British Methodist Church report.

²² See also the discussion above at 2.8.1 of one interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis which would support this critique of male-female complementarity.

²³ Alison Webster, quoted in Elizabeth Stuart, “Dancing in the Spirit,” in Timothy Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 77.

²⁴ Jeffrey John, “Christian Same-Sex Partnerships,” in Timothy Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 48.

²⁵ Eugene F. Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 207.

4.15.2 Homosexuality: natural?

4.15.2.1 Another theological approach prefers to begin, not from the complementarity of male and female, but the existence of desire, love and sex between couples who are not male and female. Christian understanding of creation need no longer be locked into a “creationist” paradigm. The evidence of science in astronomy, cosmology, geology, plant sciences, biology and other fields has made it clear that the universe’s history is an immensely complicated story of the development of matter and life. The history of nature abounds with unfruitful developments, extinctions, unsustainable populations, rapid changes in environment and habitat, and seemingly inexplicable developments. An evolutionary understanding of the change and increasing complexity and intelligence of earthly life has pushed its way within Christian understanding towards supplanting earlier accounts of the suddenness of creation. This does not entail that the Christian must give up on believing that God is Creator, or hold that God is merely the origin of the universe who watches it unfold from a position of transcendence alone. An acceptance of evolution is compatible with belief in the creative power of God, creative beyond and within time and space, a God active in the world. However, acceptance of evolution does make the believer in God unable to accept a wholly deterministic account of the development of life. God may uphold creation, accompany it, guide it, bring about good in it, and inspire spiritual beings who live in it – in other words, act providentially on and within creation – but creation may have more than a small degree of its own spontaneity and freedom.

4.15.2.2 What then of love and sex in the context of an evolutionary understanding of creation? First, a duality of sex has developed: most human beings are straightforwardly male or female, although there is a minority whose chromosomal make-up places them neither simply as male or female – the term *intersex* is used. Second, most human beings predominantly experience sexual desire for people of the other sex, and acting on this desire was, until recent scientific advances, the only way to conceive children. The urge to have sex acts strongly within many people’s lives, and is enjoyed by them. Sex, within a Christian view of an evolutionary creation, is a gift of God. Third, many human beings experience sexual desire for both sexes or for members of their own sex only – and this is not unique to human beings. It may appear within an evolutionary understanding that same-sex desire is something of a cul-de-sac, offering no possibility of procreation, yet it is a fact of creaturely existence which has emerged in human beings and other species.

4.15.2.3 Many then go on to argue that on a basis of an evolutionary understanding of God’s creative purpose, homosexuality may be a given in creation, much like race. This does not imply that any one person who experiences homosexual desires does so because of a particular reason. Rather it is the broader point that the existence of homosexual desire at all is a feature of human existence which has emerged in evolutionary development, much like race. Further evidence supporting the givenness of homosexuality is that at all times and places in human history, people have experienced homosexual attraction. The existence of gay men and lesbians is not only a modern phenomenon, although the forms of their relationships and nature of their identity and self-identity are closely linked with contingent factors (as is the case with heterosexual relationships too). For many gay and lesbian people, it is an important

part of their identity that they are homosexual. Jeffrey John, whose potential bishopric was so divisive for the Church of England, put it like this:

It is simply the case that a large minority of people find themselves overridingly, unchangeably and often exclusively attracted to their own sex. This is a very important part of their personal identity in this life and they are not being foolish or misguided when they choose to say so.²⁶

In support of this is the paucity of evidence that homosexual people can become heterosexual. Psychological treatments have largely been given up as failures, though some organisations claim that there are people whose orientation alters through treatment.²⁷

4.15.2.4 Rowan Williams has observed that the analogy with race is particularly interesting partly because of the history of discrimination which black people have faced.²⁸ Indeed such discrimination did at times consider black people to be at moral fault for being black, under the curse of Ham and in particular, more prone to promiscuity than people of other races.²⁹ Today, however, the Christian church speaks almost with one voice in understanding race as simply a given of our created make-up. It is neither an inadequacy nor a failure to belong to any particular racial group.

4.15.2.5 The analogy which the revisionist tends not to pursue is that being gay or lesbian is like belonging to a particular class. Most of us belong to a certain class, indeed, from an early age. But class is not fixed: people do not always end up the same social class as they started out. To a limited extent – though perhaps less so for those caught in poverty – once adults, we choose our class. And so this analogy may appeal to some traditionalists on homosexuality who believe that gay people, to some extent, choose their sexual orientation. Rowan Williams remarks that “one of the areas of disagreement between those who do and those who don’t wish to reaffirm the Church’s historical position on homosexuality could be characterised according to whether sexual orientation was seen as more like race than class or vice versa.”³⁰

4.15.2.6 His line of argumentation continues as follows. If being gay is like having a minority racial identity, and ethnic difference is a given aspect of God’s good creation – a fallen creation, to be sure, but not fallen specifically with regard to race – then it follows that being gay is an aspect of God’s creation. Of course, gay men and women are part of a fallen creation, and they are subject to sin as all creatures are.

²⁶ John, “Christian Same-Sex Partnerships,” 45.

²⁷ Both the American Psychiatric Association and American Psychological Association argue strongly that reparative therapies do not work, and that claims to the contrary do not stand up to close scrutiny.

²⁸ Rowan Williams, “Knowing Myself in Christ,” in Timothy Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 13-14.

²⁹ See Rogers, *Sexuality*, 54-63.

³⁰ Williams, “Knowing Myself in Christ,” 14. But note that people of mixed race sometimes move between one racial group and another, at times claimed as belonging, at others banished for being different.

But their being gay is not a specific instance of fallenness; rather it is an example of finitude. We are finite in many ways, in our ability to know, sense, manipulate the world. Similarly, it is an aspect of our finitude that our sexual desires are limited – towards the other sex, or the same sex, or to only a handful of individuals. This is not to say that fallenness does not impinge on our sexual lives: clearly selfishness, objectification of the other, pride, and the hurting of the vulnerable are as present in sex as in any aspect of relationships. But, the revisionist argues, homosexual orientation is not in and of itself a sign of creaturely sinfulness.³¹

4.15.2.7 The difficulty of course in adopting this method of assessing what may follow from the nature of homosexual orientation is that it seems as bound to a similar understanding of nature as is the more traditional line. This revisionist approach begins from certain facts – the existence of homosexual orientation, the experience of pleasure in homosexual activity, the development of love, tenderness, support, faithfulness and joy in long-term same-sex partnerships – and infers from these that they furnish direction for the Christian’s way of living within the kingdom. It is clear however, that just as arguments from nature for the limiting of sex within marriage contain some hidden premises, the same is true of these natural arguments. Principally, what is presupposed is that homosexual orientation is natural. But this is a large and unproven presupposition, because, as outlined above, there is no overwhelming consensus as to the causes of homosexual orientation. Indeed, the evidence from natural and social sciences suggests that homosexual orientation is influenced both by nature and nurture; in other words there are different patterns of innate and extrinsic conditions which influence the desires, actions and chosen identities of individual gay and lesbian people. It is surely somewhat premature, given our ignorance as to homosexuality’s causes, to build lofty arguments on the premise that homosexual orientation is like racial identity.

4.15.2.8 Even if such arguments were accepted, they may not be sufficient to show that homosexual behaviour is consonant with living faithfully as a member of the body of Christ. Just because some feature of human nature exists does not mean that exercising it is morally acceptable. As the discussion of the New Testament’s approach to sexuality above made clear, all Christians are called to exercise their freedom in denying themselves certain objects of desire, and denying the fulfilment of greed, lust, and gluttony amongst other temptations. The Church has rightly emphasised self-discipline in the life of faith.

³¹ John J. McNeill expresses this approach as follows: “God so created humans that they develop with a great variety of both gender identities and sexual-object choices. Consequently, the attempt to force humans into narrow heterosexist categories of what it means to be a man or a woman can destroy the great richness and variety of God’s creation. Always and everywhere a certain percentage of men and women develop as homosexuals or lesbians. They should be considered as part of God’s creative plan. Their sexual orientation has no necessary connection with sin, sickness, or failure; rather, it is a gift from God to be accepted and lived out with gratitude. God does not despise anything that God has created.” John J. McNeill, “Homosexuality: Challenging the Church to Grow,” in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 50.

4.15.2.9 Having considered in turn Christian arguments from nature used both to defend the Church's traditional disapproval of homosexual orientation and practice, and to promote an acceptance of homosexual orientation and practice, it seems that both, while insightful and influential, are subject to difficulties. Approaches from the order of creation which privilege what is natural to the human being are thus problematic methods on which primarily to base the church's reflection on issues of sexuality.

4.16 Drawing Threads Together

4.16.1 An overarching narrative?

4.16.1.1 Can an account be developed as to how the church should assess the many difficult questions in human sexuality, which is conscious of the conflicting evidence from nature, and which, drawing on the Christian conviction that God speaks in Scripture, places questions of sexuality within a broader framework of creation redeemed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, into whom we are baptised as members of his body? A framework might be as follows:

God the Father is the Creator of the universe, within which, in our world, male and female human beings emerged, capable (and born) of sexual activity.

God's perfect will is for creaturely fulfilment but this has been spoiled by sin: one consequence of this is disorder in sexual relations.

God continually reached out within this spoiled world through law, inspired prophets, wisdom, and definitively through the incarnation of God's Son, whose redemptive life, death and resurrection enables human beings to move towards freedom from sin, including disorder in sexual relations.

God calls Christians to live holy lives, marked by the fruit of the Spirit, including self-control.

God is drawing all creation to its ultimate fulfilment in the new creation, the consummation, the marriage feast of the Lamb, in which under the judgment of God, love will be complete, disorder healed, sin redeemed.

4.16.1.2 This indeed is a framework which, give or take emphases in language and recognising its focus on sexual manifestations of sin, the Group holds in common. It is potentially an immensely rich crystallization of the Christian faith. It includes huge areas of common ground, providing material on which to share Christian worship, work and debate.

4.16.1.3 Disorder in sexual relations is widespread and common in all of humanity. However, while this is agreed, a difference emerges in the estimation of homosexual acts, whereby some will see all such acts as instances of disorder but others not, because they would see some homosexual activity as part of God's gift of freedom for creaturely fulfilment.

4.16.2 Considerations on Christian life

4.16.2.1 How then, as Rowan Williams put it, "does the homosexually inclined person show Christ to the world?"³² This question enables us to return to the point that we are too easily drawn into narrowing human life into sexuality and sexuality into sex. The homosexually inclined person, who is part of Christ's body, the Church, is surely the recipient of grace as all are, and is called to live out his or her faith in

³² Williams, "Knowing Myself in Christ," 18.

community as all are – deepening in faith, praying and learning, worshipping, developing gifts, loving neighbour and enemy, embodying justice, working for peace, approaching holiness in countless ways. All people are sexual creatures. And so, in showing Christ to the world, all Christians are called to bring their sexual lives into that showing. Sanctification will involve different disciplines for different people: for some, faithfulness in marriage, for others and for many different reasons, celibacy. Both involve self-denial and sacrifice.

4.16.2.2 In the next question, of what form, if any, of intimate relationship is appropriate for the homosexually inclined person, the answer begins similarly from sanctification, discipline, self-denial and sacrifice. This report has intimated that for traditional approaches, the answer is in chastity, understood as celibacy. This is undoubtedly a change from an earlier answer in the Church that the homosexually inclined person should rid him or herself of the inclination, since even to desire someone of the same sex was a sin.³³ There is now, across the theological spectrum, a recognition that orientation – however it is come by – is a relative given.

4.16.2.3 The often overlooked aspect of Christian relationships in this sort of debate is friendship. Moral theology has tended to shy away from thinking about friendship because of the difficulty of maintaining the distinction between friendship and sexual relations.³⁴ Nevertheless, friendship (rather than family) has been significant for Christians in many different contexts, both historically and into our own day, and its significance in an age when sex and sexuality are overplayed is ignored at cost. As friendship blossoms through our understanding of the love of God, it is evident that friendship is a profound context for the Christian's sanctification, and that in no sense does friendship with people of the sex one desires sexually demand physical sexual expression. As discussed above (1.8.4), close, non-sexual same-sex friendships between people of homosexual orientation are certainly advocated by some gay and lesbian Christians as an appropriate response to problems of loneliness and isolation which homosexual Christians may face.

4.16.2.4 With chastity, understood as celibacy, recommended for the homosexually inclined person, it is sometimes proposed that homosexual people have a vocation to celibacy, since marriage is unavailable to them.³⁵ As this suggests that God not merely requires obedience from them in not yielding to sinful sexual activity, but that God specifically calls them to a celibate life as their path of sanctification, it has been often questioned by those who are clear that a vocation to celibacy is quite a different thing from being gay. No doubt some homosexual people may feel a particular call by God on their lives to renounce physical expression of sexuality, as a particular

³³ See, for example, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1958, which believed that those suffering from homosexual tendencies undergo difficulties and handicaps, and that "both psychiatric and medical treatment should be made available." Quoted in Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality* (London: SPCK, 1980), 211. The present report follows the more recent Kirk reports (cf. above, 4.3), which did not recommend treatment.

³⁴ On friendship between men and men, the Greek and Roman legacy, which Christianity to some extent inherited, drew no very distinct line between friendship and homosexuality. For example, for Plato friends may be united in spiritual love, but physical attraction is a step on the way to this spiritual friendship.

³⁵ See, for example, the "St Andrew's Day Statement," 9.

outworking of their faith, but in that they are no different from some heterosexual people.

4.16.2.5 However, it is still possible to advocate chastity which is celibacy as the correct way of showing Christ to the world in the area of intimate relationships without invoking the separate area of vocation. Instead, if homosexual activity is sinful, then what is required is discipline. After all, we do not need a vocation to honesty before we need recognise that telling lies is wrong. Those who promote celibacy for the homosexual person see this as part of a general understanding that sexual activity ought only to take place within marriage. And so the single, separated, divorced or widowed heterosexual person is also encouraged to show self-discipline, and refrain from sexual relationships. This is a particular concern for those Christians who believe they should only marry another Christian, which may involve reducing their likelihood of finding someone to marry. Likewise the married person, in sharing love with his or her spouse, is called to sexual discipline, refraining from sexual activity in violation of that bond. Human beings are not determined by their desires, and have the capacity to choose to act or refrain from acting on these desires. The Christian life is one of struggle in many fields of life to purity and holiness: in thought, speech and action; with regard to food, possessions and time; in embodying peace and justice. Temptations are widespread in many central areas of human existence, and the church does not recommend yielding.

4.16.2.6 There is among traditionalist writers in this area a recognition that advocating celibacy is asking a great deal. John Colwell, for example, recognises that since such sustained sexual discipline is being called for, “the Church here supremely must be a community of mercy and grace.”³⁶ An evangelically-minded report presented to the Church of England, the St Andrew’s Day Statement, while advocating singleness, also says that pastoral care needs “a certain flexibility ... taking note of the circumstances which make each individual case different from every other.”³⁷ Our Church may be divided as to the question of the sinfulness of homosexual activity, but there is still much to be said for sensitive pastoral care with gay and lesbian Christians who have not chosen to live celibate lives.³⁸ The earlier section on the danger of hurrying to judgement (1.7.3) should be recalled. It is of fundamental importance here that Christians recognise that discipline and holiness are part of all Christians’ sexual lives, that none can claim perfection, and that all are subject to the redeeming power of the Spirit of God.

³⁶ John Colwell, “Christ, Creation and Human Sexuality,” in Timothy Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 96.

³⁷ “St Andrew’s Day Statement,” 9.

³⁸ The exercise of sensitivity in counselling requires great care and it seems likely that in many respects the Church is ill-equipped, and sometimes unwilling, to offer sexual counselling (of any kind). However, note that the 1994 Report of the Board of Social Responsibility to the General Assembly made recommendations regarding the development of pastoral care for those affected by issues of homosexuality. As a result of the report, a conference was run to assist those who were struggling with the issue of homosexuality, and thereafter groups of support for those who had concern regarding the implications of the issues in personal life, were set up by the Board of Social Responsibility, with professional external supervision.

4.16.2.7 The alternative to the traditionalist line may also name itself as chastity, but is not celibacy. Chastity in the sense not of complete sexual abstinence, but rather the right ordering of our sexual lives, emerges as a path in the minds of those who would see potential for a gay or lesbian's sexual life being contained in a marriage-like relationship. Eugene Rogers' book, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, picks up from the note that marriage is a means of redemption: men and women are sanctified through marriage. Marriage for the Christian is a means by which the individual becomes more Christ-like; marriage is "a community practice of asceticism for the whole person... a discipline of denial and restraint."³⁹ Marriage is about transforming eros into agape: from falling in love to living with someone in increasing respect, tenderness and delight.⁴⁰ On this basis, he would extend its benefits to gays and lesbians:

The trouble with most conservative accounts is not that in denying same-sex couples the rite of marriage they would deny them true self-satisfaction, although they might. The trouble is that in denying same-sex couples the rite of marriage they would deny them true self-denial.⁴¹

4.16.2.8 It is here also that the possibility of vocation may return. Rather than seeing all homosexual people as having a vocation to celibacy, there are revisionist theologians who believe that some homosexual people have a vocation to a partnership with another. For Jeffrey John, a same-sex partnership, "in personal, spiritual and sacramental terms,... may be as much a vocation, as much a way of holiness, as much a covenant reflecting God's kind of love as a heterosexual marriage."⁴²

4.16.2.9 There are Christians who live in such marriage-like, long-term, same-sex partnerships; and children are reared and relatives and friends cared for. It is these flesh-and-blood realities which are in the background to the current debate and polarisation of views. How do we respond? We might recognise that such partnerships offer companionship, love, tenderness and intimacy, the opportunity for increasing in selflessness, learning patience, respect and forgiveness. Like heterosexual relationships both in and outside marriage, they are open also to possibilities of coercion, unfaithfulness and cruelty. Various questions follow. Isn't the long-term union better than haphazard and furtive sexual encounters? Does it raise a threat to the institution of marriage as great as the widespread prevalence of casual heterosexual liaisons? Is it allowable within our understanding of the purposes of God? Within the church, marriage has been understood as containing the pattern of intimate sexual relationship which for many people is an aspect of their response to God's outpouring of love. The term "marriage" is one which many gay and lesbian people would not wish to describe their long-term same-sex partnerships, for a variety of reasons, including its associations with gender-based inequality. But it is

³⁹ Rogers, *Sexuality*, 70.

⁴⁰ See *Common Order*, First Order for Marriage, 196.

⁴¹ Rogers, *Sexuality*, 70. "Marriage in Christianity is best understood as an ascetic practice of and for the community by which God takes sexuality up into God's own triune life, graciously transforming it so as to allow the couple partially to model the love between Christ and the Church. *Ibid.*, 72-3.

⁴² John, "Christian Same-Sex Partnerships", 54.

presumably the analogy between a good Christian marriage, and the situation of gay and lesbian Christian couples who live faithful lives of partnership, which has led some to take the view that there might be services for marking entry into a civil partnership – the matter for consideration sent down recently under the Barrier Act.

4.17 Conclusion

4.17.1 The conflict of opinions on same-sex relationships as an issue in human sexuality has produced a degree of polarisation not only within our own Church but in the church more widely. In conclusion, it matters therefore to insist that on matters of sexuality the Church holds much more in common than that which divides us. We begin from the conviction that Christ holds his followers together through his incarnation, death and resurrection. The witness of Scripture is authoritative for the church in our understanding of sexuality, the church being the community of the redeemed who are being sanctified. All Christians require God's forgiving grace in sexual aspects of their lives. Our sanctification involves our sexuality and sexual activity: we tend to holiness or self-indulgence in these as in all other commitments of human life. We are called to reflect in our sexuality the loving generosity and faithfulness of God towards that which God makes: faithful to God, the church, the world, our circles of family and friends, our children, our loved ones, ourselves. There is an agreed emphasis on chastity, proper boundaries for all people – homosexual and heterosexual – in their sexual lives. This may be a holiness in single living, in voluntary or involuntary celibacy, in intimate relationship and in friendships. Sanctification, provisional in the life of this world, will be fulfilled in the encounter with the God of perfect love and judgment in the consummation of all things.

4.17.2 This report has not looked closely at various important issues around singleness and celibacy, which perhaps deserve a fuller treatment. However, while questions of singleness and celibacy are not only relevant in the case of homosexuality, it is clear, in regard of homosexuality, that for many people, following on Scripture and tradition, celibate chastity is regarded as the central (perhaps only) properly Christian response of the individual to the phenomenon of his or her orientation.

4.17.3 Such a conclusion is resisted by many voices within the church as well as outside it. As this difficult debate continues with scriptural, theological and sociological justifications being urged on all sides, pressing questions, as have been raised in this report, deserve continuing attention. What patterns of human life, love and relationship echo and exemplify God's redeeming purpose within the world? What forms of relationship offer an environment in which worship, holiness, service and discipleship may flourish? How are these questions answered by the homosexually inclined person? May long-term same-sex partnerships be an environment for the nourishment of faithfulness, discipline and generosity, a context for the transformative love of Christ in the redeemed? How does the Church remain faithful to Scripture and tradition – which includes the contemporary leading of the Holy Spirit – in its discipleship, liturgy and pastoral care?

4.17.4 While it may continue to be emphasised that same-sex partnerships and friendships only really provide a context for Christ's transformative love insofar as the participants seek to remain celibate – with the implication that it is required of all

lesbians and gays that in order to show Christ, they must sublimate sexual desires – many committed Christians will not share this perspective, and deep-rooted tensions remain. The Church cannot resolve these differences by imagining that they are only pseudo-differences. They are not: they are real. But then majority or minority decisions at General Assemblies are hardly a way forward. The experience of the Working Group would affirm that encounter and exchange is more productive in a context where it must be about more than winning or losing a vote. Prayer, confession of sin, humility, a breadth of vision – all of this matters. To borrow from the language of the also difficult ecumenical encounter of churches, the “dialogue of conversion” is that process by which we all together draw closer into the mind of Christ. For as long as we are divided, we can only throw ourselves upon God. “We only know that it is he who leads and that suffices us.”⁴³

4.17.5 This report has focused largely on a small yet significant aspect in Christian theology of what it means to be human. Sexuality is part of the human condition, and homosexuality a phenomenon within that, a lived reality for some in the general population and within the life of the church. Trends in society towards the cheapening and distortion of the place of sexuality and sexual activity in human life are to be deplored – such as issue in the premature sexualization of children or the commodification of sex or the gratification of self-regarding desires. Sex, in common with other aspects of personal life that may appear to be private, has wider ramifications throughout the family and society.

4.17.6 The differences significant through the recent process of debate are numerous and include the following questions: how is God’s creation and providence to be understood? To what extent should our understanding of humanity develop from thought about sinfulness or redemption? Are homosexual acts *per se* sinful? When is it legitimate to read certain scriptural texts as teaching one thing but to believe that the Holy Spirit is leading the church to set aside that reading? To what extent are faithful gay and lesbian relationships akin to marriages? Is conducting a liturgy for a couple following a civil partnership a matter on which ministers may act? What weight do we give to the various sources for our thought on these questions? The Church, recognising the breadth of opinion on these issues, needs circumspection in its decision-making procedures.

4.17.7 Where there is now a strong measure of agreement is on the question of homosexual orientation. Many people are both gay and Christian; having a homosexual orientation is not a matter for censure; having a homosexual orientation does not preclude service to Christ in the church and the world. A homosexual orientation should not be a barrier to any role in church and state, and the Church should oppose all forms of discrimination on these grounds, both in environments where the Church carries authority and in society at large. There is a way to go here.

4.17.8 Given the need for interpretive decisions in the reading of the authority of Scripture on the matter of homosexual activity, however, the church has not discerned with common agreement how this living tradition of Scripture speaks to a number of

⁴³ Cf. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, sections 15-17, 35, for example; the second quotation is from Paul Couturier, cited in G Curtis, *Paul Couturier and unity in Christ* (SCM, 1964), 76.

the questions raised. Many will respond that the distinction between homosexual orientation and activity is untenable and unfair. For them, traditional prohibitions on homosexual activity must be reconsidered, with a greater weight being given in scriptural interpretation and moral discernment to love, faithfulness, honesty, selflessness and other reflections of God's incarnate love. But others hold that distinguishing between a morally neutral homosexual orientation and sinful homosexual activity is the scripturally-formed Christian approach to take to these matters. Likewise it would be an interpretation of love, faithfulness, honesty and selflessness. This Report, while not resolving the differences, does not duck the issue, but recognises that no-one in the church is served by a facile assumption of the way the wind is blowing, or the Spirit moving.

4.17.9 Therefore the Mission and Discipleship Council presents this report, prepared by a Group of Christians who shared in debate their own unique perspectives and convictions, and in so doing represented the wider Church. The report endeavours to present different approaches to issues in homosexuality generously and charitably, trying always to avoid caricature. The unity within the Group – and Christians' unity more generally – does not however come simply from courteous debate, listening to all points of view, and attempting to understand the other more deeply, although these are virtues which the Group members tried to exhibit. Rather our unity is in Christ, who was born, lived, died and was raised by the Father for all men and women, and by whose Spirit all Christians are led. Such unity – the unity of the Church – is greater and more hope-filled than our own, imperfect respect for others. It is this unity, in which there is intrinsically degrees of diversity as there always have been, which all debating and discovering might hope to uncover and celebrate. The Council hopes then that readers of the report will be aided by it as they read it, reflect on it and discuss it together, worship and break bread together and journey on in faith.

The Working Group

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In addition, a Reading Panel (again of a cross-section of views) was invited to make comments on the draft version of the Report, which was a most productive exercise.