

Hospitality & Homosexuality

'If there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is
the concept of hospitality' – Henri Nouwen

Preface

This paper is not an attempt to have the last word on the validity of homosexual practice, marriage or ordination. Instead, it recognises the vexed differences among Christians about these issues, which are often exacerbated by heated or exaggerated comments in mass and social media. We are seeking here to provide some guidelines for a more gracious and hospitable process of discernment and discussion about homosexual issues in church and society, in the light of our unity in Christ. Readers may prayerfully explore and discuss these pressing issues.

Introduction

This discussion paper uses the positive biblical metaphor of hospitality, which is more demanding than the secular virtue of tolerance, to move beyond the hostility often expressed in this debate. It seeks to reflect the nature of God as an abundantly hospitable, party-throwing, reconciling Father who runs to welcome his errant children (Lk 15:11-32), embracing them with arms open wide like Christ on the Cross. It argues that while seeking to embrace a wide range of people in society, we all also need to be hospitable and embrace those of different views within the church. Otherwise, our words and acts of welcome toward the world will be weakened and less attractive.

This discussion also upholds distinctive Baptist principles, such as: the primacy of the local church; relationship with other Baptist churches and unions; freedom of conscience; protection of minorities; and the separation of Church and State. Alignment with the state has not been an historic Baptist value, and accordingly, the issue of gay marriage in society needs to be framed differently from the questions of gay ordination or marriage, as we shall see.

I. BUV Position on Homosexual Practice and Ordination

In December 1997, The Baptist Union of Victoria endorsed a recommendation from the Report to Executive Council and the Assembly from the Homosexuality and Ordination Task Force that concluded: 'Applications for ordination from persons involved in homosexual practice will be declined'.

However, the Report also admitted to the church's failings with regard to sexual issues generally (1.5.1), expressed a concern for appropriate pastoral care of homosexual people (3.4.4), and highlighted the possibilities for participation in the life of the church.

The question of how to welcome homosexual people 'as Christ has welcomed us' (Rom 15:7) may need further clarification and emphasis. A third (34% Table 4.C2 in the Report) of responding BUV churches were not welcoming or supporting homosexual people 'at the door'. Growing awareness of the distinction between sexual orientation and practice¹ means that hopefully attitudes have changed in the past 15 years. Issues concerning the baptism and membership of practising homosexuals are up to individual churches to determine.

At this point Paul's injunction in 1 Corinthians 5 regarding church discipline is pertinent. When a senior member in Corinth was acting immorally, even by pagan standards (5:1), it was incumbent on the community to act. Paul's injunction 'not to associate with sexually immoral persons' does not refer to 'the immoral of this world, nor the greedy and robbers, or idolators'.

In that case, you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolator or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those inside you are to judge? God will judge those outside.

In other words, the church's own discipline should be distinguished from an issue like secular gay marriage in the world, where we are not to judge non-Christians by Christian standards. The key issue for Christians is discipleship and mutual discipline of Christians, as distinct from the world. And within the church, we have no right to isolate sexual issues from the whole range of issues that Paul identifies, such as greed and idolatry. The disproportionate focus on homosexuality has also impacted on the mission of the church.

Research by The Barna Group in the US revealed that Christian Churches are perceived as anti-gay and judgemental. Among people aged 16-29, 91% of non-Christians said Christianity had an anti-gay image. 80% of active churchgoers agreed with the anti-gay label. Even allowing for the differences between the highly polarised and politicised American situation and Australia, with Westboro Baptist's 'God Hates Fags' protests televised here, Australian Christian researcher Mark McCrindle found in 2011 that negative Christian responses to homosexuality were providing a block to belief for around 70% of respondents.² We have not succeeding in showing the world how we distinguish between ordination practice and a wider welcome to homosexual people.

¹ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 379-406.

² See Mark Brolly, 'Church Abuse Biggest Obstacle to Belief: Survey', *TMA* 11/12/2011. The Australian Communities Report found doctrines and practices about homosexuality were second to church abuse (76%) as the top 'block' to belief for 69% of respondents.

II. More Light, Less Heat: Christian Identity before Sexual Identity

The 1995 St. Andrew's Day Statement from a range of theologians states helpfully the Christ-centred nature of Christian identity, which comes before any sexual identity, straight or gay:

Our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race or nationality. At the deepest ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as 'a' homosexual or 'a' heterosexual; there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation.

Especially since the 1960s, the expression of sexuality has come to the fore as a major focus of identity in Western societies, raising the stakes and increasing the tensions in public debates. Sexuality is now perceived to be reflective of deep matters of identity, especially in the inner city.³

In a helpful article called 'The Shibboleth of Homosexuality: A Question of Evangelical Identity'⁴ Queensland Baptist Dr Paul Tyson, refers to the lawless days of the Judges, when each man 'did what was right in their own eyes'. In one of the deadly conflicts between the various Israelite tribes, if fleeing Ephraimites could not say the 'sh' in 'shibboleth', the Gileadites slaughtered them, killing 42,000 people (Jud 12:6). But this test of identity was 'fought out within the context of faithless power struggles between competing centres of power and authority within the people of God'. Further, Tyson suggests:

It is possible to argue that within Australian Evangelical circles, one's stance on issues concerning sexuality and gender – are our shibboleths. Any pronouncement one makes on these topics will typically identify you as being either 'conservative' or 'progressive' Why you might be conservative or progressive (or neither) is really not that important – the burning question is: 'are you one of us or one of them?'

The leader of Sojourners in the USA, Jim Wallis, has urged Christians to move beyond the shibboleths to maintain a sense of proportion in relation to the church's wider mission, and in this respect, both Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo are in agreement.⁵

³ See David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁴ *Zadok Papers*, Winter 2011, S184.

⁵ Jim Wallis, 'A Statement on Sojourners' Mission and LGBTQ Issues', May 9, 2011; Tony Campolo, 'Are evangelicals fixated on homosexuality' <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/19220.htm>

III. Salvation and Ethics

At some point in this debate, we need to ask ourselves: how do ethics and morality relate to salvation? The most quoted text in a 1997 survey, 1 Cor 6:9–11, has a list of offenders who ‘will not inherit the Kingdom of God’: idolaters, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and the sexually immoral – whether adulterers, or men who have sex with men. Today, greed would probably be a more widely practiced vice than homosexuality, so we need to reflect carefully on this list, especially if we are concerned to identify our modern forms of idolatry. And we need to reflect on what Paul concludes here:

And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything (1 Cor 6:11-12).

We expect our church leaders to provide evidence of being ‘sanctified’, of leading a holy life, and this is the focus of questions about ordination. But if we were to expect perfection of every church member, our churches would be empty. This is a fundamental issue for our theology of the church and mission. Paul’s emphasis is that we are all sinners together (cf. Rom 2:1–4), justified by faith in Christ, and on the road to sanctification.

IV. Biblical Authority and Theology

Conservatives usually see the homosexuality issue as a question of biblical authority, while progressives tend to emphasize the range of sources that have traditionally supported Protestant theology: Scripture, tradition, reason and experience (called the ‘quadrilateral’ in Wesleyan tradition).

It is important to acknowledge, however, that conservatives also draw on empirical studies about family life (experience and science), and progressives draw on biblical scholarship to question the meaning and significance of the biblical references to homosexual practices. Labels like ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘liberal’ rarely clarify the issues at stake, and more often fuel the fires of controversy.

It is far better to conduct respectful debates within the church, rather than have particular Christian leaders or groups use the media to make their points, thereby drawing public attention to conflicts within the church. In a climate where marriage equality debates have led to violence on the streets, the witness of the church would be more counter-cultural if we could provide a model of how to disagree in love, and how to discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches in our reading of Scripture.⁶

⁶ Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 97–127.

V. The Polity of Baptist Churches

Historically, Baptists have stressed the importance of freedom of religion, and freedom of conscience. This distinctive emphasis grew out of opposition to the established church in seventeenth century Britain, and to the laws of the state that sought to establish uniformity. Baptists are accordingly less hierarchical than other mainstream churches, but alongside this stress on freedom has been the practice of joining together in regional associations and unions, in order to express the communion of the Body of Christ.

British Baptists now also belong to the European ecumenical unions, but the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) relates directly only to the national body, Australian Baptist Ministries (ABM), and to the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), both of which have directly opposed gay marriage.⁷ Public statements from Australian Baptist Ministries are in a slightly ambiguous position, however, since there is no national assembly of Baptist churches.

If a particular union of churches is to establish a statement on public issues, this generally requires an assembly of local church representatives. It was therefore the BUV assembly that passed the 1997 resolution against the ordination of practising homosexual people.

The BUV Director of Ministries and Mission (DoMM) may act as a spokesperson on complex ethical issues such as this, which have been resolved by the statewide assembly. Other examples include the BUV resolutions on asylum seekers, reconciliation with Indigenous people, and climate change. The DoMM is not an archbishop, and the role is to keep the church focussed on common goals of ministry and mission, rather than claim infallibility on 'shibboleth' issues.

Baptist polity does not exclude the possibility, however, that local congregations may act on the basis of their own conscience and interpretation of Scripture. There are also instances where the majority of a congregation have adopted a position different from their senior pastor, with painful consequences. The desire to be 'prophetic', whether adopting conservative or progressive positions, needs to be responsive to the wider life of the church, and therefore to adopt the most careful processes of discernment.

Local churches have, for example, supported services of commitment between homosexual people, believing that fidelity is the core Christian value, which can stand prophetically against a culture of promiscuity or 'serial monogamy' – a culture that is widely in evidence in Western societies, regardless of sexual orientation.

A Galaxy Research poll from 16th August 2011 found that 53% of Australians who identify as Christians support same-sex marriage, while 41% were opposed to it. At the

⁷ At the Baptist World Alliance annual gathering in July 1994 in Uppsala, Sweden, the BWA General Council passed a resolution confirming that the BWA "proclaims the biblical definition of the family, a permanent, monogamous, heterosexual union, as the original divine plan for family life which must continue to serve as the foundation and ideal for an ordered and effective society." This resolution was reaffirmed at the annual gathering at Ede, The Netherlands, in 2009.

very least, this means that a good number of Christians will be adopting positions that differ from their leadership.⁸

Rev. Nathan Nettleton, whose 2011 appearance on an ABC Compass dinner discussion on same-sex marriage aroused some controversy among Baptists, has therefore carefully stated that he is advocating 'a personal opinion and does not represent the views of any Baptist Union of churches or the majority opinion of Baptists'.⁹

VI. Gay Marriage and the Law

We must be clear that the marriage rites of the Baptist Union of Australia are aligned with the current federal legislation that defines marriage as being: 'the union between a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others voluntarily entered into for life. Authorised celebrants with the Baptist Union of Australia are only able to solemnise marriage according to Baptist rites that accord with this definition'.

Issues for dissenting Baptist churches may arise in the future, however, if and when the federal marriage legislation is changed. Pastors in New Zealand and many other nations have already faced this prospect, and it may be necessary to discuss this further in the context of the historic Baptist separation of church and state. Many churches will no doubt maintain the traditional definition of marriage and only celebrate marriages between a man and woman, regardless of what the law provides. In decades to come, this might become a matter of conscientious objection.

We may need to consider alternative Christian approaches to marriage rites, and encourage a more specifically Christian approach to strengthening the ethos of fidelity in marriage and family. Some evangelicals argue that gay marriage belongs to the state, which is a separate sphere of sovereignty, different from the reign of Christ in Kingdom of God.¹⁰

A sense of proportion is also necessary at this point: American statistics suggest that only .02 of the population are directly seeking gay marriage for themselves.¹¹ But

⁸ Among many other stories, see Heather McLelland, 'A Mother's Journey with Jesus and her Lesbian Daughter,' *Zadok Perspectives* 106, Autumn 2010.

⁹ Nathan Nettleton, 'Supporting Same-Sex Marriage as a Heterosexual, Bible-believing, Baptist Pastor', in *Speak Now: Australian Perspectives on same-sex Marriage*, ed. Victor Marsh, Melbourne: Clouds of Magellan, 2011.

¹⁰ Cf. this submission Senate Committee Regarding Marriage Equality Amendment, 31/3/2010: 'We at Imagine – Surry Hills Baptist Church believe that the sanctity of heterosexual marriage should be upheld within our Church as exclusive, but endorse the change in the community and legal system of Australia. We hope that by doing so we might build a bridge to the LGBTI community, acknowledging the significance of their partnerships and relationships, and have an opportunity to present the person of Jesus'.

¹¹ Chuck Colson, 'The 0.2% Solution: Crunching the Same-Sex Numbers', www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/17957 citing 'U.S. Reduces Estimate of Same-Sex-Couple Households', *New York Times*, September 27, 2011 based on the 2010 US census.

American and Australian research shows that this is an important symbolic issue for many, on both sides, which links to a broader dissatisfaction with Christianity.

VII. Processes – Clarity and Charity

Many misunderstandings, such as those between pastors and congregations require a strong commitment to frank, clear and loving disclosure regarding strongly held views. A climate of mutual openness, and not a punitive culture, is vital in discussions regarding pastoral appointments and performance reviews. The provision of mediation services will be important in cases of conflict or imbalances of power.

Churches need to hold to their core missional values in these controversial debates, maintaining a Christ-like love, also bearing in mind that the world is watching and that these matters are of keen interest to the media. Will they say of us, as the Gospel of John suggests, ‘see how they love one another?’ (Jn 13:35). We need new models for robust debate that does not lead to traumatic and shameful outcomes. A good place to begin is with the principle of direct and local conversation stated in Matthew 18:15–20.

A basic guidelines of ‘relational proximity’¹² is that we should use the most direct, face to face means of communication, wherever possible. This is a core principle of respectful mediation. The use of social media, often characterized by snide and dismissive comment, tends to escalate rather than resolve conflict. Electronic media can, however, provide helpful avenues to disseminate more constructive and thoughtful exchanges that have already demonstrated their fruitfulness.

Conclusion: The Need for Patient Dialogue

Regardless of our theological orientation, Christians need to defend the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender and intersex people (LGBTI). The world often mistreats and degrades these people, and the church needs to find ways to offer them the love of Jesus. This should become a missional priority.

Local churches should lead the way here, embodying open, respectful, and loving dialogue. The many tragic stories of the suicide of homosexual people should be enough to curb the hasty and insensitive positions that have often been adopted in the church. The imposition of uniformity, whether conservative or progressive, undermines the mission of the church. We need a better dialogue – more open and ‘more humble than most of us have been’.¹³

¹² See M. Schluter and D. Lee, *The R Factor* London, Hodder and Stoughton. 1993 and *The R Option*, 2003 www.jubilee-centre.org › *Resources*

¹³ Jim Wallis, *Sojourners* (vol. 20, no. 6), July 1991, 10-11.

Questions for Discussion

1. To what extent is marriage as performed in Australian Baptist churches a universal, creation-based rite and to what extent is it specifically Christian?
2. Can we find a way of separating the legal, civil marriage processes from a Christian blessing of a marriage?
3. Given that practising Christians are a minority in Australia, what kind of prophetic voice can the Church offer the wider world?
4. How can the state protect the freedom of religion while balancing secular rights?
5. How can Christians and churches contribute to this 'debate' without being caught up in its adversarial nature?
6. In what way is hospitality a key virtue in relation to homosexual people (see Rom 15:7)? How can we be more hospitable in this debate, within the church and within our wider community?
7. In what ways is the homosexuality issue affecting the church's mission?
8. How do we distinguish the different levels of involvement of practising homosexuals in the church, whether in relation to membership, baptism, marriage or ordination?