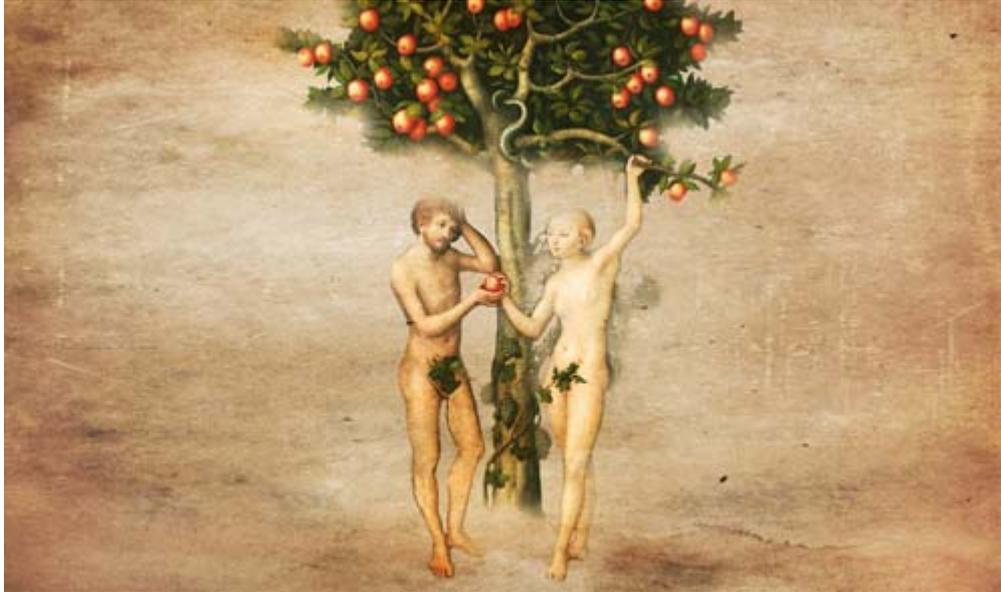


# SPACE FOR GRACE IN SEXUALITY DEBATE

FEBRUARY 19, 2017

CROSSLIGHT



By WILLIAM LOADER

In November last year I was invited by the Evangelical Theological Association to present a paper at their annual conference in San Antonio on same-sex relations. I was one of a team of four, brought together by Zondervan Publishing House to write a book, which has since been published: *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*.

I was on the LGBTI affirming side with Megan deFranza, a theologian, who has written extensively on intersex people. On the other side were Wesley Hill, another New Testament scholar, and Stephen Holmes, a theologian. We had met the year before and made a great team. We shared mutual respect and affection, which shows in our book and showed at the conference.

The trend in conservative circles in recent years has been to argue that Paul is only concerned with people's actions, not their orientation. So it is OK to be gay, as long as one does not act it out.

Wesley Hill makes the point that this is a change from earlier positions, which saw being gay as either a state of sin or as having a pathology and therefore needing some kind of reversion therapy to bring oneself back to normal. He knew from personal experience why this fails and causes so much unnecessary suffering.

In recent years more people have come out in the open about their sexual orientation. Many prominent leaders in church and society are gay and are highly respected members of the community. This has made coming to terms with what Scripture says so important.

My research on attitudes towards sexuality in the world of the New Testament and early Judaism reaches more conservative conclusions. Same-sex relations was one of the areas where Jews differentiated themselves from the world around them. The creation stories in Genesis affirmed that God made people male and female, not anything else, and the laws of Leviticus forbade lying with a man as you do with a woman.

Read within this context it is highly unlikely that Paul objected only to the act in the few verses in which he, too, depicts same sex relations as a sign of the pagan world's depravity. In fact, he begins and ends his comments by focusing on the mind, clearly understanding not just the act but also the orientation as a sign of sin.

So my historical interpretation fits more with the conservative position which Wesley and others want to abandon.

My plea has been that we take the Scripture seriously and not try to explain it away. There have been many other attempts to do so from left and right.

Is Paul talking only about pederasty? No, because he refers to mutual desire.

Is he concerned only with excessive passion? No, but also with its direction.

Is he only referring to such behaviour in religious cults? No, because his argument is psychological, applicable to all.

Does Paul see being gay a result of Adam and Eve's sin, a disability to be lived with? No, for he traces it to people's perverted understanding of God, that perversion leading to theirs.

It is better to hear what Paul said and how he was likely to have meant it. Only when we do so can we then deal with the question: what do we do? For some the answer is clear: same-sex orientation is a sinful or pathological state and such people should be supported with forgiveness and therapy. The problem is that for too many people Paul's analysis does not fit.

Are we being unfair to expect Paul to have been aware of all the possible variations of this phenomenon? Certainly most of what he and his fellow Jews knew about was what went on in wild parties. The Leviticus

prohibitions are also clearly targeting perverse behaviour, which they place alongside having sex with animals.

What if there really are genuinely gay people?

Gospel values mean we need to address each new situation not with rigid laws but with firm principles that include flexibility to adapt. Adaptation to new understandings mean we now have a different understanding from the biblical writers on many things, including the age of the universe, the origin of humankind, animals and plants, and much more.

More importantly we have had to apply biblical values to new and changed situations and reset priorities. This has belonged to the DNA of Christian faith from the beginning. Jesus gave priority to some commandments above others and faced criticism because of it. More radically, the early church came to the conclusion that it would not insist on following the biblical commandment that all non Jews joining God's people should be circumcised.

That evoked division within the church.

We have had similar situations in handling the ordination of women, the liberation of slaves, and matters such as divorce. The solution is not to conform to the latest trends but to engage the options critically in the light of the central tenets of the Gospel.

If there really are gay people and they are not all of the kind Paul writes about, then we need to show them the same level of acceptance and expectation as we do heterosexual people. That, of course, includes accepting marriage among them. If there really are no genuinely gay people but only some with a disability or perversion, then our response will be very different.

Following the conference Stephen Holmes wrote a piece for his Baptist teaching colleagues affirming that to be a good Baptist means being a community of faith where genuinely held different viewpoints can co-exist.

He could have written the same for the Uniting Church. "Space for Grace" is a helpful slogan generated by our UCA multicultural colleagues. I experienced this in my team of authors.

My hope is that love will find a way to make this possible among all of us.

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