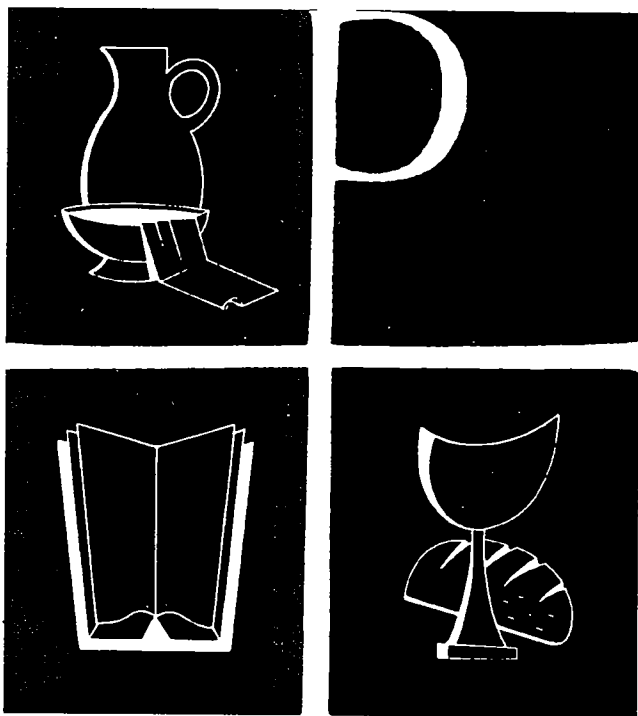


BIBLICAL AUTHORITY FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH



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PREFACE

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may lack many things, but controversy is not one of them. For more than three decades the church has been wracked by disagreements, quarrels, fights, and divisions over a range of difficult issues. Some past controversies are no longer matters of deep disagreement; the church has reached broad consensus on issues such as confessional standards, ordination of women, civil rights, peacemaking, and representation. Other matters seem intractable, however, as the church continues to fight about abortion, sexuality, ordination of gay and lesbian persons, gun control, and more.

Throughout all the years and all the issues, biblical authority and interpretation has been a constant feature of Presbyterian disagreements. Presbyterians are committed to searching the Scriptures for guidance on matters of Christian faith and life. But when we search the Scriptures for guidance on particular issues, we quickly disagree on how to interpret the Bible and part ways on the nature of the Bible's authority over the church and its members. Thus, debates about homosexuality or abortion are quickly joined by debates about the very standard that is supposed to settle our disputes!

In the 1980s, the church approved two significant theological statements on the Bible. *Biblical Authority and Interpretation* (1982) and *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* (1983) are important, useful documents that should continue to engage the thoughtful attention of Presbyterians. Both are available in *Selected Theological Statements of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assemblies (1956–1998)*, published by the Office of Theology and Worship. Yet, for all their value, the General Assembly statements have not settled anything.

Why, then, another church paper on biblical authority and interpretation? If two papers did not produce agreement, why should we expect a third to do the job? The answer is that expressing or

producing agreement is not the only purpose of church statements. Particularly when the church is not agreed, theological papers can help the church to work through the issues with grace and integrity. Theological papers from sources outside of PC(USA) controversies may be especially helpful in providing fresh perspectives on old disputes.

The Office of Theology and Worship is pleased to make available an important paper from the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, "The Nature of Biblical Authority for the Life of the Church." The paper grows out of the URC's own struggles with sexuality issues and the debates over the Bible that are part of those struggles. The United Reformed Church has not settled these matters for itself, nor will its paper settle matters for Presbyterians in the United States. Yet our church may benefit from the way the United Reformed Church has dealt with the matter as well as from some specific perspectives that it offers.

The United Reformed Church was formed in 1972 through the union of the Presbyterian Church in England and the Congregational Church in England and Wales. In 1980 the URC was joined by a part of the Reformed Association of Churches of Christ. The United Reformed Church is a member church of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches. The Office of Theology and Worship is grateful to the United Reformed Church for its kind permission to reprint "The Nature of Biblical Authority for the Life of the Church" as a contribution to the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Christians who honestly listen for the Word of God that they may do it, may sometimes disagree amongst themselves. It is not to be repented of, for it is one of the creative ways by which the Church may be guided into God's will. Such periods are fraught with danger, for honesty in searching, the intention to obey, and respect for those with whom we disagree can be unwittingly laid aside. It is at such a place of creative danger that the Church stands now. Our report does not claim to offer a definitive solution to the Church's puzzlement, but has tried to suggest a way in which it may be handled to the Church's growth and peace.

2. EARLY DAYS

Debate about what God was saying to his people occurred in the Church in the earliest days of its life. No sooner had God begun to call Gentiles into its ranks, than some of the existing Jewish members began to feel uneasy.¹ From childhood they had observed the laws of Moses, and their belief in Jesus as their Messiah had not prompted them to stop. Now Gentiles who had never recognized their Law brought their nonobservance of it with them into the ranks of the Church. It became an accepted Church ruling that since the Jewish Law existed to mark out the Jews as God's distinct people, Jewish Christians may well wish to continue to observe it. Gentile Christians, however, were not obliged to do so, but were expected to refrain from the pollution of idols, and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood.² These observances appear

to have been recommended as a courtesy to their Jewish fellow believers, though the first two became matters of firm requirement in later lists of rules for behaviour in the New Testament.³ Despite the acrimony which the debate raised, the leaders of the Church strove to assert the unity of all Christians in Jesus. The debate never questioned the authority of what was taught in the Bible, but only the manner in which it applied to the radically new circumstances which Easter had ushered in and which the conversion of Cornelius had made plain.⁴

3. PRESENT DAYS

We may ask in what respect the situation facing all the Church (and not just the URC) is symmetrical with that which faced the NT Church. The assumptions regarding the high place given to Scripture by both sides in the NT debate are essentially echoed in at least the United Reformed Church. It is acknowledged in our Basis of Union that

the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, (is) the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people.

It is upon this basis that the Biblical Authority Group has conducted its discussions. Further we may note that the practical moral teaching given in the New Testament letters to the young Church, Gentile in part at least, echoes Old Testament teaching on the same matters and, some argue, may well be drawn from it.⁵ At least we may be certain that there was a discernible moral continuity between faithful Jewish and Christian life. It is likely that the expectations of Acts 15:20 were based on the actual moral character of the young

Church and were not an unrealistic hope. Nonetheless the resurrection brought new horizons for moral motivation to the new Christian Community.⁶ It need not surprise us that moral debates surface at many parts of the NT.⁷ That we should be having our present debate does not alienate us from the life of the first Church.

However, there is a point of difference between the new situation which obtained then, and the new situation which obtains today. The pressure for change brought upon the expectations of the Christian Jews in the first century arose from the increase of the Church in those days. This increase brought Christians of a new outlook and from a different background into the fold. The problems were the problems of growth and of what constituted a proper lifestyle for people who had never worshiped the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ before. In our day the pressure for change within the Church is often stimulated by change outside its ranks. Society now takes not avowedly Christian grounds for its judgements upon standards of what is right and wrong. The influence of the Church in the West has declined along with its size; and influences, insights, and pressures which do not necessarily arise from Christian faith are making their voices heard among us. This is not in itself to be resented. Christians are part of society and are not unmarked by it. The question is in what degree (if at all) the new influences are to be welcomed or to be rejected by those who would be loyal to Christ.

4. PAST EXPERIENCE

Such questions have been felt and the teaching to be gained from Scripture has been assessed in various ways over the Christian centuries. It has generally been changes in society which have forced the matters concerned upon the attention of the Church. We

considered three different matters of this kind, the change in medical techniques from theories of demon possession to the scientific techniques of today, to varying and still debated matters of a Christian's attitude to an unsympathetic government, and the present day acceptance of lending money at interest, despite the Biblical prohibitions upon it.⁸ We agreed that new circumstances, sociological changes and the development of new technologies gave a new context for responsible action in these matters, but that the conviction about the nature and purposes of God which underlie the prescribed action in the Biblical record stand as the moral criterion by which modern action may be tested.

5. THE CENTRAL BIBLICAL WITNESS

This brought us to discuss the central texts in the debate. These have generally been accepted to be Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, Romans 1:18–32, 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10. Modern scholarship is divided in its understanding of them, and this division was reflected in our discussion. The details of the often highly technical debates must be looked for in the scholarly literature rather than within a short report of this nature.

Some understand these passages not to be referring to actions which may arise in intimacy between two loyally loving people of the same sex, but to other actions such as pederasty or prostitution. From this the conclusion is drawn that the passages are hardly relevant to our debate. It is further suggested that in such a passage as Romans 1 Paul is setting up a theological man of straw built of Jewish anti-Gentile cliches. His portrait of the idolatrous and ungodly man serves only to be knocked down again for the sake of rhetorical effect. This is held to imply that the strictures it contains are not a real condemnation of

actions which actually ever went on among the people addressed but that they are no more than exaggerated sketches of popular ideas about the way that Gentiles live. Or again, some note that the concept of homosexual orientation was not known in NT times, and that therefore it is an anachronism to suppose that the specific NT teaching can have any bearing at all upon the complex behavior patterns which we are able to identify today. There are further difficulties about the precise meaning of such terms (in RSV) as "against nature," "adulterers," "homosexuals," and even "immoral."⁹

Others of us are of a different opinion, holding that although the terms employed may be difficult of precise definition, there is little reason to doubt that they include at least some forms of same-sex erotic behavior. It was noted that in delicate matters of this kind every culture uses somewhat ill-defined and allusive terms for the sake of modesty; we should expect to find the terms difficult to translate. It was further noted that some of the lists of moral behavior required of a Christian appear to be based on Old Testament teaching, and to recall the behaviors in which the readers were charged with being shamefully involved prior to their conversion, and maybe since.¹⁰

The descriptions of Gentile behavior found in the New Testament epistles were not merely general references to the Gentile character, but a specific reference to what had gone on in the experience of those to whom the letters were addressed. Some felt no doubt that Paul knew the orientation which could nowadays be described as homosexual, although he discussed it by referring to the acts which homosexual people use. They reviewed the arguments which were offered to deny that Paul had any notion of homosexuality as such, and dismissed them as being unlikely in view of Paul's widely travelled knowledge of the world. These observations led them to conclude that the biblical discussions were of high modern relevance, noting their unanimity in disapproving same sex erotic practice.

6. WHY DO WE DIFFER?

The difference of view amongst us is complex, and probably more so than we think. It appears to stem in part from striking a different balance between the facts which press upon the interpreter. However, the balance we individually find in each passage is consistent with that which we find in each of the other central passages. Such individual internal unanimity would be unlikely if it were only the facts of the matter which were being weighed.

Some are acutely conscious of the culture in which the Church stands today, and that it is necessary for Christian interpreters to bring the light of the gospel to bear upon it by showing how the Scriptural witness may relate to the needs and the urgencies of the times. Some of our forebears saw that the cultural shifts of their times made new medical techniques, political patterns, and economic advances possible; they developed new ways by which the essence of the old laws could be honourably re-expressed in the new context. In the same way some feel today that new understanding about homosexuality and new readiness to be open to the needs of those who perceive themselves to be homosexual call for a new reading of the Biblical strictures.

We are of one mind in affirming that God has addressed us, and that his address is made known to us in the Scriptures of the OT, supremely in Jesus, and in the writings of the apostles who were sent by him to proclaim to all the world the word they had heard and seen and touched.

Some amongst us, however, who though conscious that many of the good changes of recent centuries were originally opposed by those who strove to be loyal to the clear teaching of Scripture, see the problem in a different way. They affirm that, whilst cultural changes may alter the actions which the moral imperatives of God's word require of us, the imperatives themselves are God given, and may not be brushed aside. They see that the express and repeated prohibition placed upon same-sex sexual activity requires Christians today to shape

their style of living by it, and to regard submission to the pressures upon them from current opinion to be a denial of loyalty to God. They further note that the complementarity of male and female is a part of God's given pattern for creation, and that to seek such complementarity elsewhere is to live in a way contrary to his purpose. The difference between the strands of opinion is not so much about the meaning of this or that Hebrew or Greek expression, but rather about what it means to lead a holy life.

Our examination of the key texts in regard to the homosexuality issue has failed to produce a consensus on their implications for Christians today. This is hardly to be wondered at, bearing in mind that these texts are few in number and that the issue is raised in them almost incidentally, besides the fact that we have no firmly established, independent understanding of their background to which we are able to relate what is said. However, this does not mean that they can be discounted, only that we are obliged to relate them to those wider patterns by which we make the message of Scripture intelligible to ourselves. In every age those who have found a significant message in the Bible have interpreted it according to some pattern, which offered them a comprehensible grasp of the whole Scriptural narrative. Without the use of such patterns of interpretation the Biblical story would have appeared unconnected in the extreme, and it is not surprising therefore that quite a number of such schemes have been used in the Church during its history. Most schemes have undergone considerable modifications during their period of usefulness, and some have been abandoned when it has been realized that they were not doing justice to the Biblical material they were being employed to explain. Most interpreters of the Bible have used some such scheme, though frequently it has been implicit rather than articulated in their minds.

We would view the current interpretative conflict as lying largely in the use of different schemes used by those who take part. On the one side there are those who would view the Bible along with Calvin as basically the story of God's one covenant with his people under two administrations, the calling of a community to embody in its life God's

holy purposes in the world. There are others, however, who would view the Biblical narrative as being basically a story of liberation, God's freeing of individuals and societies to be themselves. Yet again there are others who would view the Bible as a collection of texts without any inherent unity of religious truth but expressing a variety of powerful views. The matter is further complicated by the fact that some in the Church would adopt the Pietist pattern for understanding the Bible, the story being centered on the conversion and the sanctification of the individual. Between all these patterns there are bound to be overlaps and conflicts, and a text in the Bible will tend to be evaluated differently according to which scheme is operative in the mind of the interpreter.

In no way is that to be taken to imply the relativist position, that each frame is equally valid and useful in dealing with the Biblical material. Some frames, like scientific hypotheses, will show themselves more competent in dealing with what is found in the Bible and hence will maintain their position, though in all probability they will be modified in the process. On the other hand, conflict between interpretative patterns cannot be speedily resolved, but rather can only come about through persistent, humble attention to what is before us in the Bible.

7. ON LISTENING FOR THE WORD GOD SPEAKS

As members of the URC we believe that there is a supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people. It is the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments. This Word is discerned as we live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Word of God is addressed to all God's people, and it is only by our listening together that the Word can be heard to be the Word that God would speak to the Church. Hearing the Word of God is primarily a corporate action. The presence of differences of understanding among God's people is not necessarily a sign that they have different loyalties. Rather, since God unfailingly cherishes and guides the Church, such differences may mark the place where God proposes fresh light to break out from his Word. Listening to one another may be a part of listening for God's Word. Patient explaining and courteous listening need to be embraced; for both are part of the Church's search for discernment, and are at the same time a part of the Spirit's activity in granting discernment. To refuse to listen is to assert that the Word is rightly discerned by one party and that Christ is denied by the other. Such refusal would be a grave step to take. Schism has ill equipped the Church for its obedience, for it means that no part of the Church is able to listen for the Word in the context of all the Church. Our own listening is impoverished by our separation from our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are bold to believe that theirs may be impoverished by their separation from us.

Christians who hold their differences in a shared search for the Word the Spirit would make known, are those to whom light and peace may be expected to be given. On the other hand it needs to be recognized that in the past Christians who have conscientiously listened for God's Word have felt the need to separate from each other because of disagreement about what it required. Any debate which touches the nerve of the unity of the Church calls for us to be sure we know when we are at a point which concerns the standing or the falling of the Church. A study determining ways by which we may know when we are at such a point remains to be undertaken.

The Word that is listened for is the Word that God speaks. In trying to hear that Word, we do not look for confirmation of our opinion, we are engaged to listen for God's Word to us, not to have God listen to our word to him. Our purpose is not to build a bridge from where we stand back to the Scriptures so that we may feel confirmed in what we do; but to listen for the Word spoken through

the Scriptures into where we are. We have to accept that that word may confirm our wishes, may deny them, or may simply pass them by. What we seek is God's Word to us, and since it is God's Word, it carries its own imperative, and must not be refused. Since it is the supreme authority for our faith and conduct, it determines the way in which any other claim which may be pressed upon us may legitimately be heard. The Word that God speaks to perceptions of duty arising from contemporary concerns is spoken sometimes to confirm them, sometimes to deny them, and sometimes to change them so that they become a more fitting expression of what God wants his people to believe and to do. The Word God speaks may be expected to shape the life of a Christian and to make it distinctive in a God-forgetting society.

It may be costly to hear the Word of God, and may lead those who obey it to be rejected by those who had other hopes of them. But it is only by being faithful to that Word that true health for the human spirit is to be found.

Discerning the Word of God in the Scriptures is not always a simple matter. Some of the difficulties arise from the nature of God's Word itself. Christians have always been able to read the Bible to their nourishment and growth in grace, but God's Word in Scripture is not always presented plainly to our mind as waiting to be heard by the casual enquirer. We have to learn to listen. The Word we seek to hear is in the Scriptures, and we need to ask questions of the text if we are to be laid open to discern what God would say to us. The Word we seek to hear is God's address to us, and we must be prepared to find God asking questions of us so that we may be made ready to hear it. We are engaged in a conversation, of which reading the Bible is an intrinsic part. The Basis of Union does not straightforwardly identify the Word of God with what is written on the pages of the Bible, nor does it set the Word of God and the Bible as distinct. God's Word to us is not other than what is written on the page, yet it may be more than what is written on the page.

It is part of most Christians' experience that God at times holds silence. Since what concerns us is God's address to us and not our

address to ourselves, God's people have to await God's chosen time. It is also a part of Christian experience that God sometimes takes longer to address us than we would wish. To encounter difficulties in understanding what is said to us in the Bible is not necessarily due to faithlessness but it may be a step in God's leading us on to a deeper understanding of his will.

Other of the difficulties arise from ourselves. God speaks, but we have failed to fit ourselves to hear. There are many things which can make the Church or a Christian unable to hear when God is speaking. Past disobedience to what has been made known; the easy assumption that what we already hold is what God wants others to hold; the failure to cultivate a prayerful life in which intimacy with God and awe before God go naturally together; neglect of letting the Bible feed our imagination, shape our ways of thought, and set its inner rhythms on our affections; all these and more can dull the corporate ear of the Church until a word from God can scarcely be heard. But when their opposite informs the life of the Church, then differences become places of new discovery and no longer occasions of strife, and even the silences of God become places precious with expectation. Such contexts are conducive to the hearing of God's Word.

The creation of such a sensitivity is not a matter of adopting some set technique, nor is it the work of a moment. Such an awareness is the outgrowth of long years passed in honesty and openness before God. When it is present, it becomes an inheritance for younger Christians which they can add to and deepen in their turn. It may be that we have failed to build this for ourselves and for them. Maybe it is for this reason that in these days of uncertain stress, the Word of God is rare and there is little open vision.

It may be that in bringing us to our present uncertain place God is prompting us towards a more ready obedience, and a deeper inner life. The modern Church is lacking neither in scholarship nor in scholars, and practical advice upon the complex technical matters of biblical languages, of criticism, and of hermeneutic theory is abundantly available. But the cultivation of a delight in the Scriptures which are experienced as the place where God's Word is to be

discerned, of daily meditation upon what they say and upon what they may mean for our day's living, and of a readiness to obey what they declare and to rejoice in God as we do so, is something which may not be so readily abundant among us. Maybe we are being invited to begin again.

At present the URC is not of a common mind on the specific matters which are before us. What will be the signs that we have come to a place where the Church is able to make a decision which all its members can honorably be asked to embrace? Some can be suggested.

We will find ourselves listening to one another, not in order to show up the futility of the other's point of view but genuinely finding the explanations given to us, even if we are unconvinced by them, contributing to our understanding of the questions.

We shall be open and ready to share with one another the sharp edged questions which we feel God to be putting to our own heart.

We are likely to discover dishonesties in the ways we have been listening to Scripture and to one another, and to be glad to be able to step aside from them.

Above all we are likely to find that the fear of one another which has lain behind the anger which we may have felt for one another has melted away. Yet we are not aiming at a bland acceptance of opposites but at a strenuous striving to find where our obedience in the truth may lie.

Many in the present debate believe themselves to be personally rejected. We are called to keep a good or a clear conscience in times when we are spoken against (1 Peter 3:16, 21). Peter connects such a conscience with Jesus having been raised to life. A good conscience is a positive possession; not just rejection of evil, but an embracing of virtue. It is out of such a conscience that we are able to speak with dignity and to reflect the authority of Christ.

8. BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN MATTERS OF FAITH AND IN MATTERS OF CONDUCT

Should one interpret the ethical injunctions in the Bible in a different manner from the doctrinal statements? At the outset it must be acknowledged that both doctrinal statements and ethical precepts are to a very large extent contextually orientated. There is little in the way of universal theologising in the Bible (parts of the Fourth Gospel and Ephesians—also possibly some sections of Hebrews being exceptions). Otherwise the wider doctrinal significance arises out of a word addressed to a particular situation—sometimes to an immediate one as in a source and on occasion to a somewhat different one, when that source is taken up into a wider literary setting. As to which should have priority when this happens is a nice question for hermeneutical debate. The same goes for ethical injunctions; a certain situation is presupposed for their immediate reception (as has been pointed out even the Ten Commandments presuppose that those addressed have a certain societal position), but this in no way precludes a much wider extension of their significance. So what is said about both the nature and the activity of God and the moral requirements placed upon human beings has to be considered firstly in relation to the context which has caused them to be elicited. It is not therefore a question of the Bible having largely time-bound doctrinal affirmations interspersed with immediately universalisable ethical injunctions; in regard to both the context needs to be taken into account.

Having recognized this, it must also be acknowledged that doctrinal statements and ethical precepts have tended to take divergent paths of interpretation in the life of the Church. There has arisen a general core of Christian affirmation, largely composed of what is found in the witness of the Bible, and any specific doctrinal affirmation tends to be slotted into this without any immediate particular

difficulty. Even when theologians have used some philosophical framework for their elucidation of Christian truth, it is rarely difficult to trace the underlying traditional pattern. To put it another way, the references in the Bible to God and specific divine activity have tended to produce their own broad, yet distinctive hermeneutical path or paths, and this certainly makes things easier when we endeavour to assess their present significance. When we turn, however, to ethical injunctions the position is made more complicated, largely because the form, as opposed to the matter, of such subsequent discourse bears a less distinct relationship to what is found in the Bible. The general shaping of Western moral philosophy with its roots in Hellenistic thought has largely determined the form in which the Biblical injunctions have been received, which means that when we now seek to appropriate a Biblical injunction afresh, we have to bear this further factor in mind. This means that there are extra difficulties in doing justice to the commands concerning moral behavior found in the Bible when attempting to bring them into contemporary ethical conversation, than there are with Biblical affirmations about God and his action within the world which bear with them their own long, distinctive interpretative tradition.

When therefore we seek to bring the moral insights of the Bible to bear on specific contemporary situations, there are a number of questions which we need to hold before our minds, so as to make us aware of the tension which is likely to arise between what we find in the Scriptures and what we tend to assume today. Among these are:

What obligation is constituted for us today, when people in a certain Biblical situation perceived the command of God to require a specific form of obedience?

How is the original command related to the root understanding of the character of God witnessed to in the Bible?

To what extent are our understandings of the human condition (as that of Millennium Westerners) compatible with the Biblical understanding of the human position before God?

How far does the political, social, and economic situation in which we are placed permit genuine continuity in obedience to the original command? This does not mean that we need to conform ourselves as members of the Christian community to contemporary culture, but that we are bound to make our moral decisions within its context.

How far do we need to make allowances in shaping the present-day moral decision for what appears established on good scientific grounds about the human condition as opposed to cultural presuppositions and stereotypes? How do we distinguish between covert ideologies and well grounded scientific accounts?

How far is there an interaction and overlap between well-trying theological categories as original sin and the working of grace with what appears to be the established scientific description of human nature?

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of questions (it is obvious some of them overlap) which need to be in our minds when we seek to take over the Biblically perceived counsel of God to be appropriated to our present obedience; however, they do indicate the path to responsible discernment. Yet when we have borne such issues in mind, there should be basically no difference in our approach to the ethical injunctions and the doctrinal statements found in the Bible; they are both integral parts of the witness of the prophets and apostles, expressed in the imperative and indicative moods respectively.

Notes

1. Acts 10:1–11:18
2. Acts 15:1–21
3. 1 Corinthians 10:6–8;
Ephesians 5:1–10
4. Acts 15:6–11; Romans 9–11
5. 1 Corinthians 6:9,10
6. Colossians 3:1–25
7. Romans 14:1–23;
1 Corinthians 7:1–31
8. Mark 1:21–28; Romans 13:1–7;
Deuteronomy 23:19,20
9. Romans 1:26,27;
1 Corinthians 6:9; Acts 15:29
10. 1 Corinthians 6:11

ADDENDUM

Sections 1–8 of this report contain the work of the Biblical Authority Working Group as agreed by that Group. When the Core Group read the Report, it felt that it would be helpful to have further clarification of what is meant on page 9 in paragraph 1 by “patterns of interpretation.” After consultation with the Convener of the Working Group it was agreed the Core Group should ask three people from the Biblical Authority Working Group each to write an exegesis of verses from Romans Chapter 1. What follows therefore is not exhaustive but illustrative. It comes as an addendum to the report, and not as a part of it, and it has not been subject to the Biblical Authority Working Group’s joint scrutiny.

The following three brief readings from Romans are offered as illustrations of ways in which some of the key verses from the opening chapter of Romans may be read. They are neither complete nor definitive readings, nor are they offered by the Biblical Authority Group as readings which they necessarily endorse. They are offered only to illustrate the way in which differences of approach may shape the way the texts are understood.

A. An interpretation of Romans 1:26, 27

These verses are part of an extended passage in which the apostle seeks to establish the empirical unrighteousness of the human race as opposed to the righteousness of God which is revealed in the Gospel. There are two main sections: 1:8—2:3 which portrays the alienation of the Gentile world, whilst 2:3—3:8 aims to show that the Jewish people have equally failed to live up to the specific divine claim upon their lives. The conclusion of the argument is found in 3:9, “For we have already drawn up the indictment that all, Jews and Greeks alike, are under the power of sin.” (REB)

Paul's account of the failure of the Gentile world here is not particularly original, as it is very much in line with one contemporary Jewish explanation of the matter (cf Wisdom of Solomon 14:22–31). We must not, however, think that the apostle's use of this form of argument was a mere matter of conventional acceptance, as there is no reason to doubt that he was inwardly convinced of the truth of this account of the matter.

Indeed the fact that he introduces phrases from the diffused Stoicism of the period might lead us to expect that this section is not just intended for consumption by the Jews amongst his audience, but that he expected the Gentiles to see the point too. The root, however, of the argument is that human evil arises because men and women will not acknowledge the transcendent mystery of the creator and instead seek to have as the object of their worship images of finite realities which they have chosen for themselves. As a result of this fundamental alienation God allows a widespread perversion of inter-human relations to develop.

Exegesis

Because humanity has turned away from the living God, they are handed over by him to “disgraceful passions”(v. 26), the first of these being that women change their “natural functioning” for that which is “against nature.” This verse has generally been interpreted as referring to lesbian practices, and if this understanding is maintained it would be the only passage in the Bible where there is specific reference to them. Recently, however, another interpretation has been put forward which would see in them a reference to anal intercourse, which is known to have been practiced in the Hellenistic world by prostitutes and women engaged in an adulterous relationship as a contraceptive measure. In v. 27 Paul goes on to speak of males putting aside the “natural relations” with females to burn with desire for each other, mutually committing the shameful act. If this is taken to be sodomy, it could be supportive of the second interpretation of v. 26 already mentioned, but in any case it

is quite clear that Paul is speaking in this instance of homosexual practices. As a result, those who behave in such a fashion “receive in themselves the fitting reward for such error,” a phrase which is perhaps best interpreted along the lines proposed by J. D. G. Dunn, “sex treated as an end in itself becomes a dead end in itself and sexual perversion is its inevitable penalty” (Romans 1:24). It could be argued that if the non-lesbian interpretation of v. 26 is allowed, Paul is arguing basically in terms of clean and unclean actions, his reprobation being directed at the physical act of sodomy. Besides the fact that Levitical categories do not seem to have weighed overmuch in Pauline thought generally, it is clear that in this passage such practices are placed and condemned in the context of “disgraceful passions” and “burning desires,” and therefore any physical act would be viewed as but the outward sign of an inner attitude.

Implications of the Pauline argument

At least some forms of male homosexual practice are condemned by this passage, but what is written makes it impossible to judge how far that rejection extends. Though pederasty was probably the most common form of homosexual practice in the Greco-Roman world, no indication is given in the text that the apostle only had this in mind.

We are not meeting here with anything in the way of ethical injunctions but rather with an explanation of what has gone wrong in human affairs. Presumably as this is an aspect of wrongful human behavior, it is expected that adherence to the gospel would in some way rectify it.

There is no specific denunciation of divine judgement against homosexual behavior; rather such activity is thought of as arising out of the divine wrath directed at the primal act of human turning away from God. In a sense therefore those who behave in such a way have been constituted as such by God's handing over of humanity into a state of inter-personal disorder. As with other aspects of human sinfulness it is far from being entirely a matter of individual, human perversity.

Theological significance

There is no reason to think that this passage is peripheral to Pauline thought, it is found in the most extensive backcloth prepared by him for his presentation of the Gospel, and it coincides with his general teaching about the nature of sexuality in regard to the Christian life.

The proper theological significance of what is found here can only be assessed when this passage is placed within the context of what is held to be the general understanding of the primary Biblical message. If, e.g. one adopts the classical Reformed understanding of the matter, that the Bible is the account of God's calling out of a holy people to accomplish his purposes in the world, this would fit in well with the general design, the Church being there to rectify the disorder which prevails in general human society. If on the other hand one believes that the primary narrative of the Bible is about the liberation of societies and individuals, one might feel impelled to regard what Paul is arguing here to be somewhat out of the mainstream of the Bible's message, and to be relatively discounted in the name of its general thrust.

B. A reading of Romans 1:18–32

To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love revealed may look:
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.

(John Donne, "The Ecstasy")

In all cultures human beings read meaning written on the body. The things we do with our bodies are always things that we are saying, never without meaning or significance, never simply biology, but always meaning too. As Rowan Williams has argued, the significant

question to ask about our sexual lives is not “Am I keeping the rules?” or even “Am I being sincere and non-hurtful?,” but rather “How much am I prepared for this to signify?” He suggests that all that we do, whether sexual or not, might express and signify what he calls the “generous fidelity of God.”

The power of sex to signify is demonstrated very boldly in Romans 1. In this chapter we meet a pattern of thinking very common to faithful Jewish people as they watched and interpreted the Gentile world. For them, certain kinds of sexual behavior were symbolic of all other kinds of sin and depravity, and particularly of the most heinous sin idolatry. The 1959 Hollywood film “Solomon and Sheba” exemplifies such a constellation of signs. In the opening title sequence we are invited to witness the “pagan revels” and the “nights of passion.” The Queen of Sheba and her retinue are cast both as idolaters and as sexually immoral. The worship of their gods is even portrayed as being highly sexual so that idolatry and orgy are inextricably combined and connected. Sexuality expressed in ways other than straightforward and seemly marriage signifies idol worship, infidelity to God, and rebellion against goodness and truth. Paul, writing in Romans, seems to have assumed this kind of thinking and the meaning he attributes to homosexual acts is evident. Whether he is writing of a specific group or of humanity generally he describes the marks of “fallenness”—idolatry, unnatural sexual practices, and then finally all the kinds of vile and terrible conduct he can think of—from scandalmongering to lacking respect for parents. For him homosexual activity signifies a breakdown in relationship with God, and represents a disordered and destructive sexuality. There are arguments to be had about whether Paul is writing of particular individuals who have been trying out forms of sex “unnatural” to them, for the sake of novelty, looking for new forms of gratification. But it seems evident that, for Paul, homosexual activity of any kind, which any traditional Jew would have regarded as “unnatural,” signified a deep and disordered humanity. For him it was all part of well-trodden Jewish critique of Gentile culture and would have included a critique of some forms of what we, today, would think of as “straight” sex. His basic cry is

against all those who reject God, who worship false gods, who selfishly and wantonly seek to satisfy their own lusts, who degrade their bodies and who, finally, have no moral values or commitments.

We, in the twentieth century, might well recognize Paul's *cri de coeur* in our day, there are also many individuals, communities, and cultures which have turned away from the things of God. A disordered world lies in fragments all around us. However, we would not, because of our very different experience and ways of drawing meaning, use the same things to symbolize the terrors and idols of our own culture. In Paul's time, homosexual activity, as he witnessed it and understood it, was very likely considerably different from what we know today. It was connected in culture with the worship of foreign gods. It was often practiced in contexts of social dominance, where slaves were exploited. It was a ready symbol of an often decadent society. However, homosexuality as we experience it today is a much more varied and complex range of experiences and meanings. Gay and lesbian relationships do not today carry any associations with idolatry. They do not automatically carry associations with decadence or dominance, or violence, or any of the other vices which Paul lists at the end of Romans 1. They do not carry the same range of meanings and symbols as they (or their near equivalents) did in Paul's day. In Rowan Williams' terms, they do not signify the same things at all. In fact, as Michael Vasey argues, gay and lesbian sexuality may even signify now many of the things of which Paul would approve. For example, parts of gay culture today foster "an expressive rather than a brutalized masculinity." Similarly, lesbian culture fosters a way of being a woman which turns aside from the terrible victim culture and violence of the patriarchy which inevitably characterizes straight relationships. Homosexuality in our culture thus often signifies things quite different from the violence, greed and lust which Paul saw in his time. Gay relationships do not belong with idolatry and degradation as cultural signifiers today.

A woman living in a faithful and loving lesbian relationship today could hardly be expected to recognize her experience as that condemned by Paul. Equally, he would not have recognized or

understood her experiences since “lesbianism” and “gayness” as we understand and experience them today were not present within first century culture. Sexual acts and affections are given different meanings in different times. It is no help to anyone to carry condemnation of one cultural phenomenon over to another rather different one. Many gay men and lesbians today argue that their own relationships signify the generous fidelity of God—or at least that is what they wish and mean them to signify. These relationships are a long way indeed from the scandalous and careless behavior of those Paul condemned as they, as he saw it, were given up to terrible and selfish wickedness. Of course we only have his version of what he saw. It may well be that some of the people he so accuses were also seeking to signify with their love the generous fidelity of God. We cannot know. But we can listen to those who, in our day, tell us of the love that they believe is written in their bodies.

C. Exegesis of Romans 1:26–27

This text provides the fullest theological reflection on same-sex sexual relations in Scripture. Moreover, it is almost certainly the only biblical reference to lesbian sexual activity—something which contemporary Graco-Roman sources hardly ever mention in the same breath as male homosexual practice.

The context has Paul affirming that the gospel is for Jews and Greeks alike (v. 17). We see, however, that this has negative as well as positive consequences. Positively, it means that Hebrew and Gentile people are equal with respect to salvation (v. 16). Negatively, it means that they are also equal with respect to divine “wrath” (v. 18) and “judgement”(2:3). On both counts there is a comprehensiveness in God’s plan: God’s righteousness is available to everyone who has faith (v. 17), but all who spurn God’s benefits are subject to what Paul later calls “righteous condemnation” (2:5). This comprehensiveness extends not only across space, as Christian faith is “proclaimed throughout the world” (v. 8), but also back through time, to God’s creation ordinances

(v. 20). Indeed, insofar as Paul relates the wrath of God to the sin of idolatry (v. 23 ff.), he does so by presenting idolatry as an abuse of these ordinances—that is, as a false exaltation “the creature rather than the Creator” (v. 25 NRSV, cf. Ex. 20:1–3).

Above all else, it is this creation-based definition of idolatry which prompts Paul to cast homosexual practice as not only “degrading,” “shameless” and “erroneous,” but also “against nature” (vv. 26–27). Granted, the concept of “nature” can carry other meanings in the epistles (cf. 1 Cor. 11:14, Eph. 2:3). But the strength of Paul’s more general “argument from design” here means it would take a very extreme form of special pleading to divorce his understanding of what is sexually “natural” from the male-female complementarity of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. Besides, the notion of homosexual practice as “unnatural” is found in several contemporary sources, and especially in that Hellenistic Jewish tradition with which Paul himself was associated.

It may also be significant here that the “exchange” of creature and Creator exemplified by homosexual practice is described literally not just as a lie, but as *the* lie (v. 25)—the defining distortion or “perversion” of God’s purpose for the world, from which other distortions and perversions must inevitably follow (cf. Gen. 3:5). Richard B. Hays bears this out vividly when he writes that homosexual behavior is for Paul “a sacrament (so to speak) of the anti-religion of human beings who refuse to honor God as Creator. When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of God’s creation design.”

Of course, none of this would matter so much for our current debate if the specific sexual practices referred to by Paul in vv. 26–27 could be disassociated from the pattern of lesbian and gay Christian lifestyles today.

Those who deny that this passage can be read as a “blanket” condemnation of homosexual practice tend to argue that Paul’s concept of homosexuality is some way removed from the “faithful, loving” partnerships which now exist among gay and lesbian Christians. One

suggestion, mooted by Victor Furnish and others, is that Paul is in fact describing a quite particular form of pagan temple prostitution. No doubt the apostle would have known about the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth (the city from which Romans was probably written), with its thousand priestesses and “sacred slaves” known colloquially as “the sailors’ delight.” But as even the gay apologist John Boswell admits, this explanation founders when one realizes that the relevant parties are “burning with lust” for one another (v. 27) a description unlikely to fit the more dispassionate prostitution associated with such religious ceremony and ritual.

Another revisionist interpretation holds that Paul is concerned here primarily with pederasty—a practice restricted to the upper echelons of society and indulged in by basically heterosexual males. This was indeed the most common manifestation of homosexual practice in ancient Greece, but it was by no means the only recognized form of same-sex relationship. For example, the “Sacred Band” of Thebes institutionalized the pairing of soldiers as lovers to foster their courage in battle, as they fought to the death for their “faithful, loving” partner. A similar arrangement pertained in Sparta, while longer-term homosexual partnerships were accepted in Elis and Boeotia. Granted, these partnerships were often maintained side-by-side with heterosexual marriage, but it is not even true, as many gay and lesbian exegetes claim, that the Greeks and Romans had no recognition of what we would now call “homosexual orientation.” The extensive researches of Kenneth Dover in this area in fact reveal a much more complex situation than many appreciate. Notwithstanding all that has since been discovered in genetics and biology, the Anglican Bishops’ report *Issues in Human Sexuality* felt able to conclude on this basis that the world of the New Testament did in some cases recognize phenomena “which today would be interpreted in terms of orientation.”

We cannot, of course, know for certain the full range of homosexual relationships and practices with which Paul was familiar. His virtually unprecedented yoking of lesbianism with male homosexuality does, however, suggest that his perspective is unusually

broad for his time. (Granted, a few have read the “unnatural” behavior of the women in v. 26 as female-dominant coitus or even anal sex with men, but this ignores the clear rhetorical and grammatical parallels between this verse and the next, which explicitly describes male-male intercourse). In any case, the cosmic sweep of Paul’s argument suggests a concern for sexual relations as such, rather than for specific sexual techniques. Indeed, the fact that Paul uses the more generalized vocabulary of “male” and “female” here, rather than the more particular terminology of “men” or “women,” may well bear this out. Nor is it likely that as an educated Pharisee, he would have been ignorant of the subtle ethical reasoning of Plato, Aristotle and numerous other ancient philosophers, who had condemned homoerotic sexual practice while nonetheless venerating same-sex friendships.

When linked with all that we have said about the comprehensiveness of Paul’s view of salvation and divine judgement, and when placed in the context of his cosmic creation-theology, these points lead us to the conclusion that the most authentic reading of Rom. 1:26–7 is that which sees it prohibiting all forms of homoerotic sexual activity.

Group Meetings

The Biblical Authority Group met on seven occasions, each time in London, and each time for one day. At each of its meetings work on some aspect of the current discussions was allotted to the members. Sometimes this work was prepared for first presentation and subsequent discussion at the next meeting. Sometimes, in order to deepen discussion, it was circulated to members beforehand. Replies to presented viewpoints were sought, and approaches to the subject from different standpoints were encouraged.

The Group had six members appointed by General Assembly. The Deputy General Secretary was present from time to time and served as a source of general information and of advice on procedure. Our number embraced the breadth of view concerning the nature of the Bible and of its authority which are a feature of the URC. It also reflected the breadth of view within our Church upon the propriety or otherwise of homoerotic practice among Christians.

We were a group appointed to debate the authority of the Bible, and it was our weighing of this topic that determined the course that our discussions took. The other matter surfaced, was recognized, but did not direct the flow of our work.

From time to time we debated sharply and had to make efforts of heart and mind to hold the fellowship of listening, hearing and mutual understanding which was within the purpose of our having been appointed. Most of the time our debates, through touching, difficult or contentious issues, proceeded without difficulty. In retrospect it has been with respect for one another and for ourselves that we were able to share views, disagree, and from time to time modify our minds.

The members of the group worked hard and are able to look back upon their activity as a piece of service which they are glad to have given to the Church.