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# A Matter of Integrity

The Church, sexuality, inclusion  
and an open conversation



**Rev. Steve Chalke**

## **A MATTER OF INTEGRITY:**

### **The Church, sexuality, inclusion and an open conversation**

**By Rev. Steve Chalke**

***Thoughtful conformity to Christ – not unthinking conformity to either contemporary culture or textual prohibitions – should be our unchanging reference point.***

I feel both compelled and afraid to write this article. Compelled because, in my understanding, the principles of justice, reconciliation and inclusion sit at the very heart of Jesus' message. Afraid because I recognise the Bible is understood by many to teach that the practice of homosexuality, in any circumstance, is '*a grotesque and sinful subversion*', an '*objective disorder*' or, perhaps slightly more liberally, '*less than God's best*'.

Some will think that I have strayed from Scripture – that I am no longer an evangelical. I have formed my view, however, not out of any disregard for the Bible's authority, but by way of grappling with it and, through prayerful reflection, seeking to take it seriously. My prayer, in writing, is therefore to encourage a gracious and mature conversation around an extremely important pastoral and theological issue that impacts the lives of so many people.<sup>1</sup>

In the UK the Government has announced that it believes that extending marriage to same-sex couples will ensure the ancient institution '*is relevant for our century*' and has set out its intention to bring forward new legislation to accommodate it over the coming months. Marriage, however, predates both State and Church – it is in neither of their ownership. All of which means there are some extremely complex and controversial discussions to be had about same-sex marriage – which any society will do well to reflect on before rushing to premature decisions.

This article is not about those issues. Firstly, they are domestic whilst what I address here is of global importance. Secondly, I'm worried that, in the UK and elsewhere, the noise of the arguments around gay marriage will cloud and confuse the real question facing the Church around the world: *the nature of inclusion*.<sup>2</sup> I am convinced that it is only as the Christian community grapples with this that we will find wise answers, not only regarding gay marriage, but also to related questions around the Church's wider attitude to gay people.<sup>3</sup>

Some argue that any talk of rethinking our response to homosexuality is to compromise with the secular preoccupations of the West. In my view, however, it is the task of all those worldwide who

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst the hallmarks of any and every healthy community must be the ability for reasoned and gracious debate, a willingness to listen to others, an openness to change and a respect for diversity. I write this paper in that spirit, recognising that various friends and leaders whom I respect have views which differ from mine.

<sup>2</sup> Some in the UK will argue that, in the light of the current set of issues facing the domestic church, my paper is badly timed. However, experience has taught me that there is never an easy time to raise difficult discussions, and also that it is failure to air them openly, as they arise, which eventually causes the deepest problems as they cloud and confuse one another.

<sup>3</sup> In my experience these include issues such as gay people being barred from serving on leadership, elders or deacons teams, being refused believers baptism, being banned from taking communion, being denied involvement in children's and youth work and even being asked to not attend church services any more.

take the Bible's text seriously and authoritatively to grapple constantly with what it means to recognise our neighbour and to love them as we love ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Promiscuity is always damaging and dehumanising. Casual and self-centred expressions of sexuality – homosexual or heterosexual – never reflect God's faithfulness, grace and self-giving love. Only a permanent and stable relationship, in which respect and faithfulness are given and received, can offer the security in which well-being and love can thrive.

That's the point. One tragic outworking of the Church's historical rejection of faithful gay relationships is our failure to provide homosexual people with any model of how to cope with their sexuality, except for those who have the gift of, or capacity for, celibacy. In this way we have left people vulnerable and isolated. When we refuse to make room for gay people to live in loving, stable relationships, we consign them to lives of loneliness, secrecy, fear and even of deceit. It's one thing to be critical of a promiscuous lifestyle – but shouldn't the Church consider nurturing positive models for permanent and monogamous homosexual relationships?

In autumn 2012 I conducted a dedication and blessing service following the Civil Partnership of two wonderful gay Christians. Why? Not to challenge the traditional understanding of marriage – far from it – but to extend to these people what I would do to others – the love and support of our local church. Our service also gave them the opportunity, surrounded by their family and friends, to publicly recognise their dependence on God and their need to be part of a supportive Christ-centred community to strengthen them in fulfilling their promises to one another.<sup>5</sup>

Too often, those who seek to enter an exclusive, same-sex relationship have found themselves stigmatised and excluded by the Church. I have come to believe this is an injustice and out of step with God's character as seen through Christ. I leave it to others to debate whether a Civil Partnership plus a dedication and blessing should equal a marriage or not. But I do believe that the Church has a God-given responsibility to include those who have for so long found themselves excluded.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, it is argued that anything other than celibacy for homosexual people undermines the teaching of the Bible. The injunctions – of both the Old and New Testaments – against homosexual activity, it is said, are irrefutable and therefore any attempt to interpret them in new ways betrays Scripture. Things, however, may not be as we thought.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jesus parable of the Good Samaritan was shocking to his Jewish audience. In Luke's version of the story of Jesus' summary of the law, the teacher asks him the obvious follow-up question "who is my neighbour?" Jesus replies with the story of the Good Samaritan. This is a strange answer. The teacher of the law had asked who his neighbour was; Jesus' reply was to explain how to be a good neighbour. The implication being that there is no one who is not our neighbour; no one to whom we should not show grace and mercy. I'm challenged by the thought that, today, Jesus might, for instance, have told the story in terms of evangelicals and gay people.

<sup>5</sup> The liturgy we developed and used for this service is available at [www.oasisuk.org/inclusionresources](http://www.oasisuk.org/inclusionresources)

<sup>6</sup> The issue, of course, is far more complex than simply thinking through the Church's response to the questions that homosexuality presents. Although this paper is about homosexuality specifically, as the now widely used acronym LGBT suggests, we need to do some serious thinking around our responses to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities.

<sup>7</sup> The huge advance in the field of biblical studies over the last decades – as the result of significant archaeological finds and advances in historical, cultural and linguistic understanding – have brought with them new insights and perspectives on the interpretation of the biblical text.

For many, a central issue is the exegesis of the second Genesis Creation Story (Genesis 2:4-3:24), which is the one that Jesus later refers to, as recorded in Matthew 19:5: *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”* (Genesis 2:24).

Was the author intending to enshrine the view that all lifelong sexual unions should be exclusively heterosexual because this is a *‘creation ordinance’*? Or, is this simply the normative illustration, whereas the critical truths of the story lie elsewhere? If it is the former, then it is perhaps legitimate to refer to practicing homosexual sex, even within a lifelong relationship, as having *‘fallen short of God’s ideal’* and to state that those who are not heterosexually orientated are *‘in need of restoration’*. But, if it’s the latter, then does the *‘norm’* necessarily infer the *‘ideal’*? Or is it like the *‘norm’* of being right-handed, which never implies any failing of those who are born left-handed? If so, then neither of the earlier negative definitions is appropriate, but instead cause a great deal of unnecessary pain and, sometimes, terrible tragedy.

Most Christians are properly wary of using the story of God’s judgement on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) which is now widely understood to be about the indulgence, indifference to others and social injustice of their inhabitants, rather than a proof text against homosexuality.

Equally, the difficult cultural issues and ambiguities involved in the interpretation of the clauses of Levitical Law are widely understood. The old approach of dividing the laws into three watertight categories – ceremonial, civil and moral – with no contemporary obligation to keep the first two - has been shown to be simplistic. Leviticus 20:13 might tell us that *“If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; However, the next chapter, Leviticus 21:16-23, is decidedly bad news for the inclusion of any physically disabled people, “...none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God.”*

Then there are the New Testament injunctions (Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11) which, depending on the commentaries you choose, are read negatively or more positively in relation to faithful and committed (as opposed to casual), gay and lesbian relationships.

A growing number of scholars, including evangelicals, argue that what the New Testament writers have in mind when they refer to homosexual practice could not have been the loving and stable same-sex unions of the sort that exist today, of which they knew nothing. Not only did the concepts of being either *‘homosexual’* or *‘heterosexual’* not form the primary axis of Roman thinking about sexuality<sup>8</sup>, no Latin words for these two ideas exist.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is because of this that many scholars – historians as well as theologians – prefer to use the terms *‘heterogenital’*, *‘homogenital’* and *‘homoeroticism’* when referring to Greco-Roman sexual behaviour.

<sup>9</sup> See Craig Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford University Press, 1999, 2010), p. 304, citing Saara Lilja, *Homosexuality in Republican and Augustan Rome* (Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1983), p. 122.

Other helpful sources on this subject include, for instance, Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 17-26; Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World* (trans. Cormac Cuilleánáin; Yale University Press, 1992), p. 211-222; Johannes N. Vorster, ‘The Making of Male Same-Sex in the Graeco-Roman World and its Implications for the Interpretation of Biblical Discourses’, *Scriptura* (Vol 93, 2006), p. 432-454.

Instead, the New Testament references to homosexuality refer to the kind of wild, same-sex, extra-marital promiscuity which we now know was common in Roman culture and also formed an integral part of much of their popular religious practice.<sup>10</sup>

On reflection, a careful reading of Romans 1 – perhaps the most often quoted New Testament passage by those who reject all homosexual expressions of sexuality – reveals exactly this point. A considered analysis of the passage demonstrates that it is far more straightforward to understand Paul’s words as a condemnation of sexual experimentation, promiscuity and shrine prostitution than a rejection of same-sex relationships per se.<sup>11</sup> Gay and lesbian Christians just do not fit the picture of idolatry outlined by Paul in verses 22 and 23: *“Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.”* The apostle is clearly describing a group of people with a very different profile. This, of course, means that the *“Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts...”* of verse 26 cannot be a reference to them.

This conclusion is reinforced by verses 29-32: *“They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”*

Even the most superficial reading of this list of characteristics demonstrates that they just do not describe homosexual Christians nor, for that matter, the vast majority of other gay and lesbian people seeking to live within a faithful, monogamous, life-long intended relationships. Thus, their situation simply cannot be what Paul had in mind. Idolatry, promiscuity and shrine prostitution are what Paul is addressing in Romans 1 – not same-sex relationships between faithful and committed partners.

Whatever the interpretation of these passages, however, it has to be acknowledged that nowhere does the Bible actually affirm same-gender relationships. So, the question remains, can loving, committed, same-sex unions ever be regarded as biblically acceptable?

In order to answer this question we have to recognise two core principles. First, that the whole Bible matters – both Old and New Testaments – in its entirety. We downplay, disregard or dismiss it to our

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<sup>10</sup> It is common knowledge that from the early Republican times of Ancient Rome it was considered natural and unremarkable for adult males to be sexually attracted to and to pursue teen-aged youths of both sexes. Pederasty (a homogenital relationship between a man and a pubescent boy outside his immediate family) was regarded as normal and condoned as long as the younger partner was not a freeborn Roman. No moral censure was directed at the adult male who enjoyed penetrative sex acts with either women or males of inferior status, as long as his behaviours revealed no weaknesses (it was regarded as unacceptable to take the part of the passive partner), nor infringed on the rights and prerogatives of his male peers. Though same-sex relations between women are not as well documented, the Romans generally had far more flexible gender categories than our contemporary society. More than that, all of this activity was integrated into their religious life.

<sup>11</sup> It is into this hedonistic environment, rife with promiscuity (described in footnote 7), that Paul writes an encouraging pastoral letter to the infant church in the capital city of the empire.

great cost. But, second, the vital, though often avoided and ignored, question is about how to understand and interpret it properly.

We all know that some minority interpretations of Scripture have struggled for decades before eventually becoming accepted by the majority. So, when Nicolaus Copernicus discovered that the Sun, not the Earth, was the centre of what we now know as our solar system, Scripture was used to condemn him. Luther, for instance, quoted Joshua 10:13 and called Copernicus a “fool”, while Melancthon, the first systematic theologian of the Reformation, cited Eccles. 1:4-5 and recommended that “severe measures be taken to silence” all those who dared to agree with Copernicus, in order to “preserve the truth as revealed by God.” Meanwhile Francesco Ingoli, an influential Catholic priest, wrote an essay condemning Copernicanism as “philosophically untenable and theologically heretical.”

Eventually, in 1633, the best part of a century after Copernicus’ work was first published – Galileo himself was tried and found guilty of heresy for “following the position of Copernicus, which is contrary to the true sense and authority of Holy Scripture.” He was forced to recant, and placed under house arrest for the rest of his life. Why? Because, while Copernicus’ critics couldn’t see beyond the exegesis of the biblical text, the real issue was to do with hermeneutics.

Exegesis and hermeneutics are two essential tools for understanding the Bible. Although the two terms are often used almost interchangeably, hermeneutics is the more widely defined discipline of interpretation theory, comprising the entire framework of the interpretive process. Whilst exegesis focuses primarily on the written text – the genre, structure and meaning of its words and phrases, sentences and paragraphs – the remit of hermeneutics encompasses verbal and nonverbal communication of the wider culture as well as the word on the page. It asks about what was going on in the culture surrounding the writer and what worldview were they writing out of. Its task is to unearth all that is behind the text including the cultural and political backdrop into which it was written including the social assumptions and perceptions of the audience to whom it was originally directed as well as those of its author.<sup>12 13</sup>

A key challenge the Church faces – which often goes unrecognised – is that the Bible does not provide the final answer to a whole number of issues to do with inclusion with which Christians have subsequently wrestled. Take just two examples:

There are several New Testament texts that are very clear about the role of women in Christian communities. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 says: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority

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<sup>12</sup> Hermeneutics, the art and science of textual interpretation, has wide application to all texts of historical significance. It encompasses everything in the interpretative process including verbal and nonverbal forms of communication as well as prior aspects that affect communication, such as presuppositions, pre-understandings, the meaning and philosophy of language, and semiotics. It then goes on to deal with the complex questions of how a text from another time and culture can speak to one’s own time and culture. It involves the contemporary reader in developing an awareness of her own social location and assumptions about the text, as well as that of the ancient world of the text. So, in terms of the Bible, the task of hermeneutics is to explore how, for instance, Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, written about Jew-Gentile relations within the 1<sup>st</sup> century churches of Galatia, might speak to subsequent churches in which Jew-Gentile relations are of little consequence. For more on biblical hermeneutics, see the article on the subject by Anthony Thiselton in Sinclair B. Ferguson, J. I. Packer and David F. Wright (eds.) *New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> None of this is to imply that, as part of its job of analysis of the text, good exegesis should ignore the current knowledge of the culture of the time of the text’s writing – it is simply that technically, as it does so, it begins to interact with the wider discipline of hermeneutics.

*over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.*" The text appeals to Genesis 2 and the very nature of creation as its source of authority for the silence and submission of women.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul writes: *"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."*

There have been numerous popular and theological attempts to soften these injunctions. Some suggest these verses were added by later editors, or that they address specific communities and refer to particular women. Others say they are offset by Romans 16 where Paul commends *'our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae'* and later greets Junia, commenting that she is *"outstanding among the apostles"*.

Regarding Phoebe, however, the New Testament uses the word deacon (servant) to refer to those who serve alongside the overseers/elders of a local church (see Phil. 1:1). But, in 1 Tim 3, where it is noted that women can fulfill this 'secondary' role (v.11), the qualifications for the post of overseer/elder (v.1-7) are very male indeed!

Regarding Junia, although some suggest that the import of Paul's greeting is to name her as an apostle, once again the overwhelming evidence is that the easiest reading of these words, and the one that is, of course, in line with the rest of his thought, is that the phrase simply means Junia was *'esteemed by', 'well regarded' or 'greatly respected'* among the apostles.<sup>14</sup>

In truth, the absolute and universal character of the Epistles' instructions is not easy to escape: *"I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man" "for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." "Women should remain silent in the churches."*

In my view, although motivated by a laudable concern for inclusion, many of the arguments that have been constructed in the attempt to soften or nullify what is the clear and uncompromising stance of Scripture unintentionally end up clouding the real issue – one of wider hermeneutics rather than simply exegesis.

For all those Christians who accept that women have any role, however minor, in teaching or leading, rather than simply serving in a local congregation or any wider expression of church, the Bible – the closed canon of Scripture – does not provide the final answer to the issue.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the critical question is this: How have such large numbers of us come to hold an understanding of this issue, and to regard it as biblical, when it differs so significantly from that of the New Testament writers themselves?

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, *'esteemed by'*; the alternative reading of Romans 16:7 in the New International Version

<sup>15</sup> In reality, exegetically, there is a far stronger argument to support a new understanding of those NT passages which have been wrongly read as relating to homosexuality as opposed to 'homogenital' promiscuity (see above) than there is for air-brushing out those which talk about the unacceptability of women fulfilling teaching roles within the Church.

"It's cultural" we say. But, if that's the case, why is the issue of the role of women regarded as 'cultural' by so many while homosexuality isn't?

Which culture does our phrase 'it's cultural' refer to. By whose authority do we decide to re-interpret any Bible passage? If 'it's cultural' amounts to saying that "because the way we think about the role of women in this day and age is different to that of the New Testament writers it's OK for us to ignore them" we are on very shaky ground.

To make 'this day and age' our spiritual norm is to place us all on the 'slippery slope' of relativism. It is thoughtful conformity to Christ – not unthinking conformity to either contemporary culture or ancient textual prohibitions – that should be our unchanging reference point. Only this approach can provide us with a hermeneutic which is robust enough to deal well with the ethical challenges of a forever changing world.

Take another example. How has the whole Church found itself believing something about slavery which is so at odds with the Bible?

William Wilberforce and friends were condemned by huge swathes of the Church as they fought for abolition. They were dismissed as liberal and unbiblical for their '*deliberate abandonment of the authority of Scripture*'. But, on the basis of a straightforward biblical exegesis of the Bible's text, their critics were right.

The Old Testament not only endorses slave keeping and trading, it sets out terms and conditions for its practice (eg. Leviticus 25:44–46). Although the New Testament proposes a more humane form of slave keeping, it fails to deliver a clear cut protest against it. Of course, Galatians 3:28 explains "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This passage is, however, no more a call for the abolition of slavery than it is of the sexes or of national identities and cultures.<sup>16</sup>

How then did Wilberforce and friends reach their conclusions? It was their view of the proper interpretation of Scripture. They saw that the biblical writers did not take blind dictation from God, instead, their personalities, cultural and social understandings all played a part in the formation of their writing. So, rather than basing their approach on isolated proof texts, the abolitionists built their stance around the deeper resonance of the trajectory of Scripture. Their compass for this re-calibration was Jesus who, through his inclusion of both women and various groups of socially unacceptable groups of his day, challenged social norms and perceived orthodoxy.

The Bible does not always speak with one voice. It is a very diverse collection of books, written in many different times and cultures, containing an array of perspectives, not a few tensions, and even some apparent contradictions. Instead of pretending that this diversity does not exist, our task is to do justice to all these components as well as holding them together with a coherent theological approach.

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<sup>16</sup> Aside from any other consideration, this lone verse in Galatians (written in the mid to late 50's) pre-dates both Ephesians (6:5 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters...') and Colossians (3:22 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything...') both of which were authored in the early 60's.

The New Testament writers move the issues of the treatment of slaves, women and homosexual people on from the Hebrew Scriptures, which in each case reveals a continuation but also a development of the Old Testament's stance: Though slave keeping is still endorsed in the New Testament, slave trading is now condemned.<sup>17</sup> Though women are still subordinate to men they benefit from greater freedom. Though permanent same-sex relationships are still not supported, there is no longer talk of capital punishment and there is a greater engagement with the issue of sexuality.

Through my hermeneutical lens, the Bible is the account of the ancient conversation initiated, inspired and guided by God with and among humanity. It is a conversation where various, sometimes harmonious and sometimes discordant, human voices contribute to the gradually growing picture of the character of Yahweh; fully revealed only in Jesus. But it is also a conversation that, rather than ending with the finalisation of the canon, continues beyond it involving all of those who give themselves to Christ's on-going redemptive movement.<sup>18</sup>

Christianity is not about a book, but about a person who is the Word of God made flesh. On the issue of women or slavery, as just two examples, the New Testament closes some distance from where even the most conservative Christian now is in their understanding. The process of understanding the character and will of Yahweh – as revealed through Jesus – is the continuing task for every generation. Therefore, biblical interpretation is not finished, but is the endless, open-ended project of all those who take its text seriously and authoritatively.<sup>19</sup>

So, here is my question. Shouldn't we take the same principle that we readily apply to the role of

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<sup>17</sup> 1 Tim 1:10 condemns 'slave traders'. (Though the same verse also refers to 'those practicing homosexuality', as we have seen (see above, especially footnote 10) this term refers to the casual and promiscuous 'homogential' practices of male Roman citizens, rather than the behaviour of loving, sensitive and faithful lesbian and gay people – something which can readily be seen from the context as well as the content of v.9-10).

<sup>18</sup> For a much fuller treatment of this understanding of biblical interpretation see Karl Allan Kuhn, *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation*, (Fortress Press, 2008), enthusiastically endorsed by Walter Brueggemann.

Kuhn's work introduces an approach that regards Scripture as a sacred dialogue between God and humanity. Together, he explains, the task of the Church is then to discern and express the character of God, God's will, and what it means to be God's people.

Kuhn's view represents a creative alternative to the traditionally polarised views of those who, at one end of the spectrum, argue that as God's 'inerrant' or 'infallible' Word, the entire Bible was dictated to its human authors, by God, without error, and those, at the opposite end, who claim that Scripture is simply human testimony to various experiences of God, and that therefore its readers are free to draw from or dismiss any part of it as led by their personal inclinations.

Kuhn explains that Scripture is not best understood as a 'divine monologue'; the solitary voice of God dictating a flawless and unified declaration of God's character and will. Nor is it best understood as simply a human presentation of and testimony to God. Instead, it is most faithfully engaged when it is understood as a 'sacred dialogue' between God and humanity, as well as among humanity about God, his creation and our role as his image partners; an on-going conversation which God initiates, inspires and participates in among humanity, as his people struggle to discern and express the character of God, God's will and what it means to be God's people now and in the future.

<sup>19</sup> This statement summarises one of the key themes of Walter Brueggemann's work.

women, slavery, and numerous other issues, and apply it to our understanding of permanent, faithful, homosexual relationships? Wouldn't it be inconsistent not to?

What are we to make of the kind of fancy exegetical footwork which can allow (in spite of the 1 Timothy 2 argument from the order of creation) one approach to the role of women in church leadership, while rejecting the acceptance of faithful same-sex relationships because it would overturn a 'creation ordinance'?<sup>20</sup> Is this 'pick and choose' approach to the New Testament more to do with an outworking of social conditioning and cultural prejudices than a genuine grappling with its text?<sup>21</sup>

## A Pastoral Plea

Why am I so passionate about this issue? Because people's health and safety as well as their lives are at stake.<sup>22</sup> Numerous studies show that suicide rates among gay people, especially young people, are comparatively high.<sup>23</sup> Church leaders sometimes use this data to argue that homosexuality is

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<sup>20</sup> A good example of this approach is William J. Webb's book, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, (IVP, 2001). Webb speaks of what he calls a 'redemptive movement hermeneutic' (in some ways similar to Kuhn's continuing 'sacred dialogue'). He feels that, in the cases of slaves and women, there is enough indirect support from within Scripture for the relevant prohibitions to be considered as 'culturally bounded' (in spite of 1 Timothy's argument about women being grounded in the order of creation) and therefore, because of his on-going 'redemptive movement hermeneutic' argument, not binding on us today. For him, however, the biblical prohibitions regarding homosexuality should be considered 'transcultural' and are still applicable today. In my view, although it has often been stated that gender and sexuality are not of the same category in terms of 'creation ordinances', in the light of the biblical text, there seems little substantive evidence to support this kind of claim.

<sup>21</sup> At the same time as saying this, I recognise that the view I present is a departure from what has traditionally been regarded as an orthodox understanding of Scripture. The challenge for me, as for us all, is to have the courage to explore honestly the extent to which our opinions – around this or any other issue – have been formed, or are being formed, by Scripture as opposed to unconscious cultural bias. If I am not in a place, on one hand, where I am open to Scripture to confront my presuppositions and, on the other, for advances in biblical understanding to inform and change my view of its teaching, I will be the poorer person for it.

<sup>22</sup> Having no background in either genetics or psychology, I do not feel qualified to make a contribution around the 'nature v. nurture' debate. However, in my role and experience as a pastor, employer and educator, it is clear that, for the vast majority of people, same-sex attraction is not one of choice but, for many, it is the cause of relentless bullying, exclusion, misunderstanding and isolation. The latest research from the Equality and Human Rights Commission ('Prevention and Response to Identity Based Bullying' Report, March 2011) as part of their 'How fair is Britain?' project has found that bullying based on students' identities remains a widespread problem and is limiting the achievements of those who are bullied. The study for the Commission, carried out by Goldsmiths, University of London, found that two in three lesbian, gay or transgender secondary school pupils said they had been bullied and nearly one in six of them had received death threats. For more information <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/news/2011/march/widespread-bullying-in-schools-is-not-being-tackled-new-report-shows/>

<sup>23</sup> According to the UK's Mental Health Foundation, "Research carried out in the United States suggests that suicide rates for young lesbians and gay men may be considerably higher than rates for heterosexual young people. A report commissioned by the US Government concluded that lesbian and gay youth were two or three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people, and that they may account for 30% of suicides in young people. Other US studies have suggested that as many as 40-50% of young lesbians and gay men have attempted suicide. There is a growing body of research which suggests that the same is true in the UK. Suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, acts of self-harm and actual suicides are thought to be more common among young lesbians and gay men, as a result of homophobia and the associated feelings of isolation. Age is an important factor in the lives of lesbians and gay men, since it is when young people are in the process of

unhealthy when tragically it's anti-gay stigma, propped up by Church attitudes, which, all too often, drives these statistics.

To quote from *'Suicide and Self-Harm'*, a report in 2000 from The Mental Health Foundation: *"Some of the theoretical models underpinning counselling and psychotherapy, for example, still regard homosexuality as abnormal or as a sign of incomplete development. Until this is no longer the case, and until legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual identity is passed, it would seem unlikely that lesbians and gay men will feel entirely safe...."*<sup>24</sup>

I believe that when we treat homosexual people as pariahs and push them outside our communities and churches; when we blame them for who they are; when we deny them our blessing on their commitment to lifelong, faithful relationships, we make them doubt whether they are children of God, made in his image.

The pastoral situation, however, is still more pressing than this. The issue of any church's attitudes to homosexuality has huge impact, not only on those individuals who are lesbian or gay, but also on their parents, siblings, wider families, friends, colleagues and neighbours.<sup>25</sup> Tragically, I know well a

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*coming to terms with their sexuality that they are particularly vulnerable to isolation and stigma among their friends and families. Ways of coping with these feelings may include self-harm, alcohol abuse, and eating distress, and may result in suicide."*

Lisa Bird & Alison Faulkner, *Suicide & Self-Harm* (The Mental Health Foundation, 2000) p.12 Available on line at <http://mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/suicide-self-harm.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> How many people are lesbian, gay or bi-sexual in Britain? The demographics of sexual orientation are notoriously difficult to establish.

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, *"Estimates range from 0.3 per cent to 10 per cent using different measures and sources. None of these estimates correct for the possibility of higher than average rates of non-reporting and misreporting among LGB people. The only official estimate of five—seven per cent by the Department of Trade and Industry, is based on a wide set of published sources drawn from a range of national settings and using various dimensions of sexual orientation... The four ONS Omnibus Survey trials give findings of 1.4 per cent to 2.5 per cent LGB or 1.9 per cent in the first three trials combined. The Citizenship Survey gives a lower proportion of 1.5 per cent. Other sources have estimated the population to be as high as 10 per cent. None of these surveys provides an adequate basis for estimating the true size of the LGB population of GB."* Equality and Human Rights Commission Research report 37, Peter J Aspinall, *Estimating the size and composition of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population in Britain*, (University of Kent, 2009) p.13. Download available from [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

The UK Treasury's assessment before the Civil Partnership Act in 2004 placed the percentage of gay people at 7%, whereas when the Office for National Statistics surveyed 238,206 people across Britain in 2010 (perhaps the most comprehensive breakdown on the question yet) the figure was just 1.5%. A further 0.5%, however, self-identified as 'other', and 3% responded as 'do not know' or refused to answer. In total this adds up to 5% of people who do not identify as heterosexual. It has been suggested that because data collection happened on doorsteps or over the phone, respondents may have been deterred from giving accurate responses - particularly if they were not openly gay at home. It is therefore open to question whether a significant proportion of the 3.5% who answered as 'other' or 'do not know' may have been homosexual or bisexual, whilst, at the same time a percentage of people may have lied in their claim to be heterosexual.

For more information about the 'demographics of sexual orientation' around the world go to: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_sexual\\_orientation#cite\\_note-bbc.co.uk-14](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_sexual_orientation#cite_note-bbc.co.uk-14)

family torn apart (in an all too typical scenario) because the Christian parents of a daughter entering a Civil Partnership – as a result of the teaching they had received – refused to attend the ceremony. Their daughter – also a committed Christian – who had taken years to find the courage to be honest with them about her sexuality (for fear of their response) felt betrayed. Brothers and sister took different sides. Neighbours, work colleagues, church members and friends all joined in. Thus a rift was created which has left in its wake much sadness and pain, a catalogue of broken or strained relationships and some very deep regrets.<sup>26</sup>

What I have found most remarkable, however, is the fact that for all the rejection that so many gay people face from churches, their inner sense of spirituality and commitment to Christ still pushes them to want to belong.

A good friend of mine tells me that he walked past the front door of our church building in Waterloo almost every Sunday for three months before finding the courage to enter. Another – the son of a vicar – that he first realised he was *'different'* to his school friends at the age of six or seven, but that it wasn't until puberty that he began to understand exactly why. Then, from the age of around 14, he remembers crying himself to sleep, almost every night, for the rest of his teenage years, as he pleaded with God to change him. In his early twenties he found the courage to confide in his old church youth leader, who responded by attempting to exorcise demons from him in order to *'cure'* him. Eventually, after university, he went to work for a Christian charity. He's bright and hardworking and soon rose to a position of some seniority. Feeling, however, that he had to be honest about who he was, once again he plucked up the courage to talk. A month later he was made redundant. He didn't go to a church again for five years, but one Sunday morning he turned up at church, told me his story, explained that he had thought about ending his life, wept buckets and asked if he was still acceptable to God.

There are also many who, under pressure to conform from their local church (and so, as they see it, find acceptance from God) work hard to suppress their true sexual orientation and prove their heterosexual credentials. They know, all too well, that disclosure often leads to rejection. Too many even marry as part of their elaborate cover-up or denial. There cannot, however, be many who have been in pastoral charge, for any length of time, who do not know something of the tragic consequences that this course of action sometimes has. Over the years, the pressure of living with such a level of dishonesty can slowly become unbearable, and the marriage – too often after children have been born – collapses under the strain.

For all of these reasons, I face a hard choice; a choice between the current dominant view of what Scripture tells us about this issue and the one I honestly think it points us to. This is why I seek to speak and write openly and, I hope, graciously, to encourage a compassionate, respectful and honest conversation that might lead to our churches becoming beacons of inclusion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Although the research and debate tends to be around the percentage of people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual and transsexual in any country – estimates are that, in reality, the issue impacts much larger numbers of people in any community (some suggest between 35-50% of the population or more). This is simply because these people are friends and family, colleagues and neighbours. When the Church treats one gay person negatively its behaviour has huge repercussions with a far wider grouping of people.

<sup>27</sup> I have spoken with so many pastors and leaders around the world who bemoan what they refer to as the *'conspiracy of silence'* which exists around the issue of sexuality. Reasons for this include the fear of losing employment, funding and friends. This unhealthy silence will continue unless we are able to engage in a mature, tolerant and honest discussion together. This paper is written as a contribution to that, much needed, conversation, rather than as a definitive word on the issue.

None of this is to point the finger at others. I have remained silent, for fear of damaging important relationships. Even in this I realise my self-centredness, for no rejection I might suffer is anything compared to what so many homosexual people endure all their lives.

I understand that there are many who will take other views to me. I respect their right to differ with me graciously, just as I try to do the same with them.<sup>28</sup> However, I believe that as the leader of a local church, a charity and many thousands of young people in schools and staff around the country and the world, I am called to offer support, protection, and blessing in the name of Christ, the definition of justice, reconciliation, and inclusion<sup>29</sup>, who beckons each one of us out of isolation into the joy of faithful relationship.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than condemn and exclude, can we dare to create an environment for homosexual people where issues of self-esteem and wellbeing can be talked about; where the virtues of loyalty, respect, interdependence and faithfulness can be nurtured, and where exclusive and permanent same-sex relationships can be supported?

Tolerance is not the same as Christ-like love. Christ-like love calls us to go beyond tolerance to want for the other the same respect, freedom, and equality one wants for oneself. We should find ways to formally support and encourage those who are in, or wish to enter into, faithful same-sex partnerships, as well as in their wider role as members of Christ's body.

I end where I started; in the coming months there will be huge and often heated debate around gay marriage. I am committed to listening and trying to understand the intricacies of the arguments on both sides. But, whatever the outcome and whichever side of the debate we find ourselves on, my hope is that as Christians we face what I think is the central issue – what does real, Christ-like, inclusion look like?

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<sup>28</sup> This, of course, is the nature of inclusion.

<sup>29</sup> *'Inclusion'* is a commonly used word. It is easy to assume, therefore, that when we use it everyone knows what we are talking about and that we are all talking about exactly the same thing. In fact, just like other big words – such as peace, justice, love, forgiveness etc. – inclusion awaits definition and content. For the Church it is our commitment to Christ and his incoming Kingdom which shapes all our definitions and the ethical choices which stem from them. *'Inclusion'* only finds its meaning through the lens of Christ's life, death and resurrection. So, for instance, Christ-centred inclusion is not without a sense of accountability and confrontation with the possibility of exclusion. See Matthew 18:15–17 where Jesus teaches his disciples: *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."*

<sup>30</sup> I am aware that there will be those who suggest that my view undermines some who, recognising their homosexual orientation, have chosen to live a life of abstinence. Though, as Jesus taught, there are those who have been granted the gift of celibacy, I know that, for some, bearing this 'gift' has been a painful struggle. I feel compelled, however, to speak of the truth as I understand it - for there are also countless LGB&T people who have been left isolated, abandoned and excluded from churches in the UK and around the world as a result of what I suggest is a misunderstanding of Scripture.

## **WHAT NEXT:**

To access further on-line resources and to join the conversation, go to [www.oasisuk.org/inclusionresources](http://www.oasisuk.org/inclusionresources)

- 15 minute teaching video from Steve Chalke based on the content of this article
- Small Group Questions for use as discussion starters with the teaching video
- 'Signposts': Where to find further help, resources and support
- Order of Service/Liturgy for the blessing of a same-sex couple

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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