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SCRIPTURE AND SAME SEX RELATIONS

(Presentation by R.V.Alistoun to DEWCOM; Kempton Park, October 24th, 2006)

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Contemporary English Version

An Irish minister, new to his appointment, decided after his first Sunday that the church was too dark. Calling the church council together he proposed that a chandelier be installed. Wanting to please the new minister they agreed. However, a few days later he was approached by a representative and told that they were going back on their decision. "Why?", asked the mystified minister. "Well, in the first place", the member explained, "we find that the secretary can't spell it. In the second place, we've asked around and nobody can play one. And in the third place, what we really need is more light in the church!"

More than twenty years of world Church talk on a relatively straightforward matter such as is before us has produced no unequivocal pronouncement. (What must the world think?!) Clearly, there is need for more light in the Church. It is good, then, that the convenor of this meeting has suggested that the place to begin is with Scripture. For of that book someone once said, "*Your word is a lamp that gives light wherever I walk.*" So, as Maria, that eminently sensible lady, said in *The Sound of Music*, "*Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.*"

1. The Creation account in Genesis 1 has God saying "*Now we will make humans, and they will be like us...So God created humans to be like himself; he made men and women. God gave them his blessing and said: Have a lot of children! Fill the earth with people...*". This points to the fact that the creation of humans to *be like God himself*, involved the making of *men and women*. Men only, women only, it appears, would not have made up whatever it means to *be like God himself*. It takes both, together. And to *Have a lot of children*, and to *fill the earth with people*, two parts of a substantive purpose of God in making humans, is met only in the making of the distinctives, man and woman, and in their 'marriage' alone. Two males or two females do not fit the bill. Sex acts between them are outside of the Creator God's declared order and purpose.

The second creation account, Genesis 2, says the same, emphatically. "*Adam*", the man, is made. Then comes that wonderful statement of grace, "*the LORD God said, "it isn't good for the man to live alone. I need to make a suitable partner for him."*" So he follows up with creating all the animals. They are paraded before the man and named by him. (I believe that the act of naming is very important in Hebrew understanding; it stresses both essence and distinction.) But no animal "*was the right kind of partner for the man.*"

So God gave Adam an 'anaesthetic', or "*made him fall into a deep sleep.*" Taking part of the man the LORD made a *suitable partner for the man*. Not another man – "*the LORD made a woman.*" When the man woke up and saw her he said, "Yippee!" Or in the more sedate language of scripture, "*Here is someone like me! She is part of my body, my own flesh and bones. She came from me, a man. So I will name her Woman!*" The

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scriptures then add: *“That’s why a man will leave his own father and mother. He marries a woman, and the two of them become like one person.”* The Hebrew, of course, says *one flesh*.

So is set before us both the differences and the *complementarity* of the man and the woman. They are *coordinated*, they fit together like a hand and a glove, a lock and a key, a violin and a bow. In physical design their genitals ‘fit’, in coupling their parts ‘marry’. And intellectually and emotionally each supplies what the other lacks. Since creation this complementarity and coordination has been celebrated and sung about in a thousand different ways. Conversely, the ground of joy in those songs highlights a negative: a same sex pair can never ‘marry’ in anything like the same way. The differences and the complementarities simply are not there, neither in physical design nor completely in the other components.

So, in the light of the fundamental doctrine of Creation, Scripture teaches that the total intimate bonding of a man and a woman alone fulfills the LORD God’s procreative and unitive purposes: *“One flesh!”*, *“One new person!”* Our Lord Jesus Christ himself affirmed that order, twice citing Genesis 2:24. The apostle Paul did the same. The negative implications are clear: same-sex sex unions are incongruent, they are out of order, they are outside of God the Creator’s design and purpose.

It is worth noting that embedded in the story of creation we have a directive from the LORD God to the humans, positive and negative: *“You may eat fruit from any tree in the garden, except that one that has the power to let you know the difference between right and wrong.”* In time the tempter seduced the Garden Pair to eat of the central tree, in the belief that they would so become equal to God, able to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. So they ate. And arrogant man, going on deciding for himself what is right and what is wrong, continues to suffer disastrous consequences.

2. The next two Bible passages which bear on our subject, Genesis 19:1-13 and Judges 19:20-28, we treat together.

Walter Wink, influential minister of the United Methodist Church in the USA, dismisses both stories as “irrelevant”. He says that the unacceptable behaviour in both cases was not the homosexual act at all, it was rather *“a case of ostensibly heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them ‘like women,’ thus de-masculinising them.”* So he argues that those incidents have nothing to say either way about *“a caring homosexual partnership between two consenting adults.”* True enough, on the face of it. The horrible thing in both stories is the spectre of rape, unnatural rape, and gang rape at that.

However, the judgment of the Sodom story by Jude, the brother of our Lord, must be heard. He says: *“We should also be warned by what happened to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.. Their people became immoral and did all sorts of sexual sins (NIV gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion)”* (Jude 7). Clearly, then, whatever

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the motive of the Sodomites might have been in their frenzied attempts to get at those male strangers, their city was notorious for indulgence in *'all sorts of sexual sins'* or *'perversion'*. Given the nature of the intended rape that can mean only one thing. That act has been written down in history as *'sodomy'*. So, sexual acts between two people of the same sex, whether consenting and caring or not, is written down in Scripture as a *perversion* – a turning aside from the natural order.

Further, having in mind the 'Tree' in the 'Garden', it is worth noting that the summary statement in the book of Judges, in which the Gibeah event is recorded, is: *"In those days Israel wasn't ruled by a king, and everyone did what they thought was right."*

3. Next comes Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which both say the same thing: *"It is disgusting for a man to have sex with another man"*.

It is a fact that, historically, homosexual acts were linked with idol worship, with pagan cult practices. It is also a fact that the word translated *disgusting* in the above version of the text (NIV *an abomination*) was often used in Hebrew in relation to idolatrous religious practices. So some, like D.H.Field, point out that *"in the first place"* the stern warnings of Leviticus are set in the general context of idolatry. He goes on: *"Viewed strictly within their context, then, these OT condemnations apply to homosexual activity conducted in the course of idolatry, but not necessarily more widely than that."* It is right that he takes care to make the qualifications, *"in the first place"* and *"not necessarily."* For a reading of the lists of forbidden practices in which the homosexual strictures are set down in Leviticus 18:1-23, 20:1-21, shows that not all the forbidden acts were related to pagan cult practices. Many of them relate to ordinary sexual morality. So, the indications are that, whether committed inside or outside of the context of the primary stricture of idolatrous worship, the LORD God, disapproves of same sex acts in themselves. Walter Wink is right then when he includes the two Leviticus texts among those which *"unequivocally condemn same-sex sexual behaviour."*

4. Now we come to the Gospels and an argument from silence, which cuts both ways.

There is no direct reference to same-sex sex acts in the Gospels. Opposite conclusions have been drawn from that silence. On the one hand I have seen in print, twice from the hands of ministers of the MCSA, the inference that because Jesus never spoke about homosexual acts he therefore regarded them either as a matter of indifference or that they had his blessing. On the other hand – and more likely – his silence may well be saying say that he did not speak to the issue because he didn't need to. It wasn't necessary to speak of it among Jews. Well versed in the law of God, it was taken as *sine qua non* that same-sex sex acts were out. The Jewish mind was settled. Same-sex sex acts characterised the pagan not the Jewish world. So Jesus didn't need to speak to it. Like malaria, that is not spoken of at the south pole because it is not an issue among the Eskimos.

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That being said, there is one possible, but unlikely, reference to the subject in Matthew 19:12a, "*Some people are unable to marry because of birth defects*" (NIV "*because they were born that way*"). The disciples panicked when Jesus outlined God's marriage standards. In response they said that the best thing, then, is to stay single. So Jesus, probably with a smile at their naivety, moved on to the subject of the gift of staying single. He identified three sorts of people who don't marry. Two who can't, and one which for the sake of the Kingdom choose not to. Should we generously grant that the *birth defect* was not physical but rather psychological or genetic, there is still in Jesus' mind no marriage for those so afflicted. He says that they are to be counted among those who remain single.

5. When we move out of the Jewish and into the pagan world, the world of the New Testament letters, same-sex sex acts become a live issue. For in that world the Church met it head on. We will home in on three specific references, but first an excursion.

In recent reading and re-reading of the NT letters I have been forcibly struck by the many references to the Christian attitude to the physical body, and its use. Archbishop William Temple once famously said that *Christianity is the most material of all religions*. In that he certainly included the truth that Christianity is the most physical of all religions. The Son of God once wore a body like ours. In that body he expressed himself faultlessly in our world. So it is no surprise to read in letters from the apostles, exhortations and teachings about the body like: "*Dear friends, God is good. So I beg you to offer your **bodies** to him as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing. That's the most sensible way to serve God.*" (Ro. 12:1). "*We are not supposed to do indecent things with our **bodies**. We are to use them for the Lord who is in charge of our **bodies**. God will raise us from death by the same power that he used when he raised our Lord to life. Don't you know that your **bodies** are part of the **body** of Christ? ...Don't be immoral in matters of sex. That is a sin against your own **body** in a way that no other sin is. You know that your **body** is a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. The Spirit is in you and is a gift from God. You are no longer your own. God paid a great price for you. So use your **body** to honour God.*" (1 Cor. 6:13b-15, 18-20). "*It is God's will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own **body** in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.*" (NIV I Thess. 4:3-5a). Time is against quoting many other passages which carry the same message. Those quoted do not specify homosexual acts, but nobody can be blamed for thinking that the apostle may well have had them in mind when he wrote against "*doing indecent things with our bodies*", and when in other letters he made blanket references to "*all kinds of sexual sins*", and urged "*kill every desire for the wrong kind of sex. Don't be immoral or indecent*".

In any event the NT message about the Christian view of the body is clear. We are not landlord's who have the right to do with 'our' bodies what we like. Rather, we are tenants who are answerable to the true Landlord and Owner, who happens to be their Designer too. We are to use our bodies for his honour and as he has ordered, not according to our lusts, drives, desires, fancies or whims.

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Now to the three specific references.

1 Timothy 1:8-11

The context relates to would-be teachers of the Law of Moses who have'nt got a clue what they are talking about, verse 7. We can take it that Paul is aiming at Judaizing Christians, a perennial problem in the young Church. They would persist in trying to bring Gentile believers under the yoke of the ceremonial and ritual laws of Moses, as essential to being a complete Christian. Paul insisted that that requirement was done away in Christ. But not so the moral law! That remains. Indeed, *"Still the Law and its commands are holy, and correct and good"* (Rom. 7:12). But it is not there *"to control people who please God"*; for love of him they are eager to conform to his will. The Law is there *"to control lawbreakers...The Law was written for people who are sexual perverts or who live as homosexuals or are kidnappers or liars...It is for anything else that opposes the good news that the glorious and wonderful God has given me."* The list of *"lawbreakers"* put before us in this passage suggests an 'updated version of the Ten Commandments' for Christians living in a pagan context. It tells us what God the Lawgiver has outlawed.

The principle of this passage is supported by our own John Wesley in three successive sermons among the forty four, for he had a great horror of the spectre of antinomianism finding a home among the Methodist people. Those sermons are, "The Original, Nature, Property, and Use of the Law", and sermons I and II on "The Law Established through Faith".

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Here we meet the Sovereign God. We are told that certain behaviours exclude their willful practitioners from *"the blessings of God's Kingdom."* And we are warned, *"Don't fool yourselves! No one...who is a pervert or behaves like a homosexual will share in God's Kingdom."* A stern warning, so our eyes fall gratefully on the encouraging redemptive note that follows, *"Some of you used to be like that. But now the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of God's Spirit have washed you and made you holy and acceptable to God."* The good news is that God the King does not write off strugglers! On the contrary, all the help of his Son and of the Holy Spirit is given to those who wrestle with any and with all sorts of sins. For the King would redeem us all, completely.

Romans 1: (18-)24-28

In this passage God the Creator speaks.

As with idolatry, Same-sex sexual acts, lesbian and gay, are seen by the apostle as coming out of the 'bad exchange' fallen human beings made when they went away from their Creator's intention: *"So (that is, because they didn't want to know God) God let*

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these people go their own way. They did what they wanted to do, and their filthy thoughts made them do shameful things with their bodies. They gave up the truth about God for a lie, and they worshipped God's creation instead of God, who will be praised forever.

Amen.” A further indictment is that same-sex sex acts are unnatural, not only shameful:

“Women no longer wanted to have sex in a natural way, and they did things with each other that were not natural. Men behaved in the same way. They stopped wanting to have sex with women and had strong desires for sex with other men. They did shameful things with each other....” In all of this scripture says one thing loud and clear, same-sex sex acts are against the Creator's order of things, they are “unnatural.” In that sense they can be read as an offence against the Creator himself.

For a summing up of the import of these three passages I turn to D.H.Field who says: *“It seems beyond reasonable doubt that Paul intended to condemn homosexual conduct (but not homosexual persons) in the most general and thologically broad terms he knew. His 3 scattered references fit together in an impressive way as an expression of God's will as he saw it. As Creator, Lawgiver and King, the Lord's condemnation of such behaviour was absolutely plain.”*

It is interesting, very interesting, that Walter Wink, although he disallows (on insufficient grounds, as many hold) two of the above passages, nonetheless agrees with Field that a proper reading and exegesis of even the few biblical texts that he does allow lead to only one conclusion: God disapproves of same-sex genital acts. In Wink's own words: *“Where the Bible mentions homosexual behaviour at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether the biblical judgment is correct.”* He goes on to distance himself from the biblical judgment. And that puts before us the real issue.

That issue was put before us in the draft of our own MCSA Discussion Guide four years ago, and was acknowledged by me in my submission to the Working Group, as follows: *“Considering the seemingly incompatible approaches to the Bible in the debate on same-sex relationships, your observation that “the issue is not about same-sex relationships so much as it is about Scripture” is arresting. For that reason the ‘presenting problem’ may well be placing a real watershed issue before the church that is other and greater than the draft document suggests: namely, will “ the Divine revelation recorded in Holy Scripture as the supreme rule of faith and practice” (L and D 1.6) continue to be upheld (in the MCSA)?”*

And that, I submit, is what the crunch issue really is: will we bow to the authority of the LORD our God whose *“statutes are for our good always”*, or will we disobediently eat the fruit of the tree and ourselves decide what is right and what is wrong, making god's of ourselves – taking our place not merely alongside but above God.

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