Christians and Same Sex relationships
An alternative view to the Discussion Guide

1. Introduction

At the outset it needs to be made clear that this document is not written by someone who is a homophobe, conservative, traditionalist, fundamentalist or any of those other emotionally-charged terms that are commonly used to describe people who put their faith primarily in the Word of God.

It is written on behalf of people concerned with the direction that the Church is taking in many parts of the 'liberated' world in denying the plain and clear Word of God in favour of socially-acceptable stands on key issues of morality and faith.

The writer of this document stands fully in support of the first 5 recommendations (with one minor but significant alteration as shown) of the report entitled "Christians and Same-sex Relationships: A Discussion Guide for the Methodist People of Southern Africa (Conference 2003)" (hereafter called "The Discussion Guide") as listed below:

> *4.1 The MCSA affirms the dignity and sacred worth of all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation, and commits itself to dealing with homosexual people in particular with deep compassion and care, recognising that such people have frequently been the victims of discrimination and abuse.*
>
> *4.2 The MCSA repents of any attitudes or actions of the church that may have resulted in the stigmatisation of homosexual people and in their alienation from the mainstream of church life, and humbly seeks their forgiveness wherever this may have happened.*
>
> *4.3 The MCSA acknowledges the prevalence of sexual brokenness in people of all sexual orientations and seeks to be a place of loving, non-judgemental acceptance where healing and transformation in this aspect of people's lives can be known and where God's good gift of sexuality ~~in all its rich diversity~~ can be celebrated.*
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> *4.4 The MCSA welcomes into its membership all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation. As in all other cases, membership is on the basis of repentance of sins and confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (Laws & Discipline, para. 3.2); and so there should be no exclusion of people on the basis of their sexual orientation.*
>
> *4.5 The sexual expression and practice expected of members should be that envisioned in the Conference statement: "Methodists believe that sex means being faithful, loving, loyal, caring - in a marriage relationship with one other. Sex is about relationships.' (2003 Yearbook, p94). Promiscuity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, can never receive the blessing or endorsement of the church.*

The support for these five recommendations is made on the basis that we are all sinners and all, whether sinners or saints, are acceptable to God only on the basis of His grace, and thus, by definition, all sinners are welcome join the 'fellowship of strugglers' that is the Church.

However, we stand in disagreement with the final three recommendations, as duplicated below:

> *4.6 While marriage - by definition a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman - is not possible for same-sex couples, the church should make it possible for life-long affirming same-sex relationships to be placed in the context of the church's blessing. The requirements of such covenantal relationships of same-sex couples should be the same as those for married couples - permanence, faithfulness, truth, trust, long-suffering, forgiveness, mutual companionship, helpfulness and care.*
>
> *4.7 The MCSA affirms that the lay offices of the church should not be closed to those of same sex orientation, including those in relationships which are in keeping with the requirements expressed in points 4.5 and 4.6 above. As in all other cases, leadership is on the basis of a confirmed call from God to serve in the particular capacity of the office in question. This would include those who seek to become Local Preachers.*

4.8 The MCSA affirms that those of same-sex orientation, including those in relationships which are in keeping with the requirements expressed in points 4.5 and 4.6 above, should not be excluded from the ordained ministries of the MCSA.

This position is taken on the basis that we stand by the Biblical assertion that homosexual sex is a sin and that no person who wilfully continues living a life of sin, should be accepted as a leader within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This includes adulterers, drunkards, gluttons, fornicators, those living together and others wilfully living a life of sin without acknowledging that sin and attempting to deal with it. The reasoning behind this stand constitutes the remainder of this document.

1.1 Objective of this document

The objective of this document is to attempt to balance the entirely one-sided view expressed in the Discussion Guide, with the hope of encouraging a more balanced approach to the discussion of this critical issue. In addition, it is intended to provide comfort for those who believe in the Biblical witness of homosexual sex as a sin and feel under attack by the Discussion Guide and some of the arguments expressed therein.

In order to provide balanced arguments in the discussion it will be necessary to deal with some minor points of interpretation, which may appear to be nit-picking or arguing about semantics, but this is necessary in order to show that the equivalent nit-picking and arguing about semantics in the Discussion Guide are not the last, or even, authoritative word on the subject.

The objective of this side of the debate is not to win, but rather to help to guide people towards the truth.

1.2 Context

Before entering into a more detailed discussion of the issues at hand, it is important that a few fundamental issues of context are clarified:

1.2.1 Sinfulness

At the outset, we must acknowledge that all are sinful. Thus this document is not written from a position of perceived superiority in any way. We acknowledge that we are sinful by nature and by thought, word and deed – a situation for which we repent and continually strive to remedy.

1.2.2 Promiscuity

The Discussion Guide is clear (see quote above in point 4.5), and we would affirm its stance, that all types of promiscuity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are contrary to God's will. The real issue for debate is whether homosexual sex in a monogamous, long-term, covenantal relationship is acceptable to God or not.

1.2.3 Sexual expression

The Discussion Guide, in its title, refers to 'Same Sex Relationships'. This is confusing terminology as there is a vast difference between a 'same sex relationship' and a 'same sex sexual relationship'. All of us are party to relationships of the first kind and, in our view, these are not the subject of the discussion here. Thus references to the biblical relationship between David and Jonathan, for example, are irrelevant.

Thus we would state categorically that homosexual tendencies, inclinations or desires are not at all sinful in themselves. It is only the sexual expression of those feelings that we believe is sinful.

This discussion thus focuses purely on 'same sex sexual relationships'.

2. Wesley

The Discussion Guide, in its introduction, recommends "John Wesley's famous quadrilateral of Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience as the main resources that need to be enlisted in this process of examination and discernment".

The Discussion Guide also follows this with the following statement:

> *It needs to be noted that of these four resources, Scripture is primary. "Methodists affirm the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary rule of faith and practice and the centre of theological reflection …. Methodists acknowledge that Scriptural reflection is influenced by the process of reason, tradition and experience, while aware that Scripture is the primary source and criterion of Christian doctrine." (2003 Yearbook, p176)*

By quoting Wesley's famous quadrilateral, an attempt is made to suggest that Wesley would be supportive of the process that follows within the document. However, in reality the document dispenses with the Scriptural stand, as will be discussed later, and moves on to the other three aspects of the quadrilateral.

The degree to which Wesley considered Scripture as 'primary' is not stated as clearly as Wesley would have stated, in fact did state, himself. The following excerpts from Wesley's sermon number 136, entitled "On Corrupting the Word of God" speak for themselves.

> *The First and great mark of one who corrupts the word of God, is, introducing into it human mixtures; either the errors [heresies] of others, or the fancies of his own brain. To do this, is to corrupt it in the highest degree; to blend with the oracles of God, impure dreams, fit only for the mouth of the devil! And yet it has been so frequently done, that scarce ever was any erroneous [heretical] opinion either invented or received, but Scripture was quoted to defend it.*
>
> *And when the imposture was too bare-faced, and the text cited for it appeared too plainly either to make against it, or to be nothing to the purpose, then recourse has usually been had to a Second method of corrupting it, by mixing it with false interpretations. And this is done, sometimes by repeating the words wrong; and sometimes by repeating them right, but putting a wrong sense upon them; one that is either strained and unnatural, or foreign to the writer's intention in the place from whence they are taken; perhaps contrary either to his intention in that very place, or to what he says in some other part of his writings. And this is easily effected: Any passage is easily perverted, by being recited singly, without any of the preceding or following verses. By this means it may often seem to have one sense, when it will be plain, by observing what goes before and what follows after, that it really has the direct contrary: For want of observing which, unwary souls are liable to be tossed about with every wind of doctrine, whenever they fall into the hand of those who have enough of wickedness and cunning, thus to adulterate what they preach, and to add now and then a plausible comment to make it go down the more easily.*
>
> *A third sort of those who corrupt the Word of God, though in a lower degree than either of the former, are those who do so, not by adding to it, but taking from it; who take either of the spirit or substance of it away, while they study to prophesy only smooth things, and therefore palliate and colour what they preach, to reconcile it to the taste of the hearers. And that they may do this the better, they commonly let those parts go that will admit of no colouring. They wash their hands of those stubborn texts that will not bend to their purpose, or that too plainly touch on the reigning vices of the place where they are. These they exchange for those more soft and tractable ones, that are not so apt to give offence. Not one word must be said of the tribulation and anguish denounced against sinners in general; much less of the unquenchable fire, which, if God be true, awaits several of those particular offences that have fallen within their own notice. These tender parts are not to be touched without danger by them who study to recommend themselves to men; or, if they are, it must be with the utmost caution, and a nice evasion in reserve. But they safely may thunder against those who are out of their reach, and against those sins which they suppose none that hear them are guilty of. No one takes it to heart, to hear those practices laid open which he is not concerned in himself. But when the stroke comes home, when it reaches his own case, then is he, if not convinced, displeased, or angry, and out of patience.*
>
> *These are the methods of those corrupters of the word, who act in the sight of men, not of God.*

Wesley concludes the sermon with the following paragraph:

If, then, we have spoken the word of God, the genuine unmixed word of God, and that only; if we have put no unnatural interpretation upon it, but [have] taken the known phrases in their common, obvious sense, -- and when they were less known, explained scripture by scripture; if we have spoken the whole word, as occasion offered, though rather the parts which seemed most proper to give a check to some fashionable vice, or to encourage the practice of some unfashionable virtue; and if we have done this plainly and boldly, though with all the mildness and gentleness that the nature of the subject will bear; -- then, believe ye our works, if not our words; or rather, believe them both together. Here is all a Preacher can do; all the evidence that he either can or need give of his good intentions. There is no way but this to show he speaks as of sincerity, as commissioned by the Lord, and as in his sight. If there be any who, after all this, will not believe that it is his concern, not our own, we labour for; that our first intention in speaking, is to point him the way to happiness, and to disengage him from the great road that leads to misery; we are clear of the blood of that man; -- it rests on his own head. For thus saith the Lord, who hath set us as watchmen over the souls of our countrymen and brethren: "If thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it;" -- much more if we use all methods possible to convince him that the warning is of God; -- "if he do not turn from his way," – which certainly he will not, if he do not believe that we are in earnest, -- "he shall die in his iniquity , but thou hast delivered thine own soul."

Clearly Wesley was in favour of taking the Word of God at face value using its most "common, obvious sense" and was not in favour of "introducing into it human mixtures", "mixing into it false interpretations", "adding to it", 'taking from it" or "washing their hands of those stubborn texts that that will not bend to their purpose".

Thus our understanding of 'Wesley's quadrilateral' is that:

- Scripture is primary. Thus these are not four equal legs on which we stand. Scripture stands on its own – if the latter three, in some inconceivable way, agree against Scripture, then the plain Word of God must carry the day.
- The other three legs of the quadrilateral are tools that can be used in the interpretation of Scripture, not alternative structures that can be used against Scripture.

These concepts are fundamental to Methodism, as can be seen from the following quotes from our tradition:

- *Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? Are you determined, out of the said Scriptures, to instruct the people committed to your charge; and to teach nothing, as required of necessity for eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scriptures.* (Order of service for the ordination of candidates).
- *The Word of God, as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is called the Holy Bible*. *It is that revelation of divine truth and record of God's will, from which we derive all correct knowledge of religious truth and duty. It is the only sufficient rule of a Christian's faith and practice.* (Methodist catechism, 1855)

On this basis, let us look at what the Scriptures have to say.

3. Scripture

The following passages of Scripture deal with the issue of homosexual sex:

Genesis 19:1-29

This long passage deals with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In it we see Lot receiving 2 male angels as visitors in his house. The men of Sodom discover there are two visitors and arrive at the house, demanding:

"Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." (v5, NIV)

Lot refuses and instead offers his two virgin daughters to the men of Sodom. They refuse, God strikes them blind and helps Lot and his family escape before the destruction of Sodom.

Leviticus 18:22

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. (NIV)

Leviticus 20:13 — *If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (NIV)*

Deuteronomy 23:17 — *No Israelite man or woman is to become a temple prostitute.*

This verse is really more about prostitution than about homosexual sex, but does clearly imply male homosexual sex in the concept of a male prostitute (remembering the Scriptures are unfortunately always written from a male perspective).

Judges 19-21 — This ghastly story is very reminiscent of the Lot story in Genesis 19. A man visits Gibeah with his concubine and stays with a man in the city. During the night the local men pound on the door and demand:

"Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him." (19:22 NIV)

The man refuses and eventually sends out his concubine who is raped by the men and dies. The rest of the story details how the remainder of Israel turns against Gibeah and destroys the city.

Romans 1:26-27 — *Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. (NIV)*

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 — *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral not idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes not homosexual offenders not thieves nor the greedy not drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (NIV)*

If we consider the texts detailed above using Wesley's encouragement to "put no unnatural interpretation upon it, but [have] taken the known phrases in their common, obvious sense" then the conclusion has to be that Scripture is clear that homosexual sex is a sin.

3.1 Alternative Points of View (as contained in the Discussion Guide)

The Discussion Guide presents three different approaches to reading the Scripture.

3.1.1 First Approach to Reading Scripture

The first approach mentioned is "*to focus upon what is explicitly stated in Scripture about homosexuality, and to accept those references as conveying the biblical position on the matter*".

The Discussion Guide comments on this position as follows:

There are others, however, who claim that this way of reading the Bible is inadequate, and that the conclusions that are reached as a result do not fairly represent the biblical witness. The following objections are cited:"

As was illustrated above, it is clear that John Wesley would not count himself among the 'others'. There are also many respected theologians and leading men and women of God who would not be part of the group of 'others', many of whom will be quoted in this document.

For completeness and to ensure balanced discussion on the issues, the various 'objections' raised will be discussed below:

a) Historical and cultural distance

The Discussion Guide includes the following general statement:

> *This approach to Scripture fails to recognise the historical and cultural distance between our times and biblical times, and assumes that the biblical writers' conclusions about sexuality are directly translatable into our modern context.*

This statement is of great concern as it could be used as a general argument to discard just about anything in the Bible that we find difficult. Are we saying that the Bible is an 'old dated book' and needs to be viewed with caution, or are we affirming that "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8)?

The Discussion Guide raised two specific objections:

It firstly claims that '*the primary purpose of sexual activity in biblical times was procreation*' and that as a result '*any sexual activity that specifically precluded procreation would be shunned*'. It is not clear where this startling conclusion is drawn from, but there seems to be little, if any, biblical support for such a view. To our knowledge, nowhere does the Bible specifically preclude any sexual activity on that basis. The disallowed sexual activities listed in Leviticus are stated clearly as not being permissible as they are detestable, not because they preclude procreation.

The Bible also does not even suggest that sex between a man and a woman in marriage is only allowed for the purposes of procreation. The Bible is full of references to prostitution, but nowhere is the reason for it not being unacceptable based on the fact that procreation is not intended in the act.

The suggestion then that the biblical writers were constrained by a narrow view of sexual expression thus has no standing. A quick reading of Leviticus 18 will make it quite clear that all manners of sexual perversion were well known at that time.

The second point of objection is that homosexuality is a modern term.

The argument made here is that we now have a much deeper understanding of sexuality and homosexuality that was not available to the biblical writers. This may be true but only has any weight if we imply that God, who clearly has a better understanding of sexuality and homosexuality than any of us, had no real impact on the Scripture produced. If "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), then we are engaged in a very dangerous argument that can be used to disregard any passage of Scripture. We are also, in a way, suggesting that God has gained a much deeper understanding of homosexuality in the last 20 years!

The second point that needs to be raised here is that many of the passages are not drafted with the use of any particular term, and are very explicit in forbidding sex between people of the same sex. This is clear from the passage in Romans, which Eugene Peterson translates as follows in 'The Message':

> *Worse followed. Refusing to know God, they soon didn't know how to be human either – women didn't know how to be women, men didn't know how to be men. Sexually confused, they abused and defiled one another, women with women, men with men – all lust, no love.*

So the discussion is not about the term, but about the sexual act between two people of the same sex, as was clarified in section 1.2.3 above.

b) Other specific issues have been accepted

The Discussion Guide makes the point that "*there are a whole host of Scriptural injunctions governing sexual behaviour that are no longer accepted as normative today*". Thus we become "inconsistent" to allow some and not others.

The real danger of this argument is two-fold:

- The point of definition of what is acceptable has been clearly moved from 'Scriptural injunction' to 'normative today'. On the basis of normative today, is there such a thing as sin?
- This is a classic downward spiral. Once we make one exception, this argument means it is easier to make the next exception and so on. The reality is that this is what actually happens. But does this make it right?

Three specific examples are given. The first two are the levirate marriage (where the eldest brother was obliged to marry his brother's widow if the first brother died childless) and the punishment for adultery being stoning for both the man and the woman.

There are two issues that need to be covered here:

- The levirate marriage is not part of Western society today, but may well be practised elsewhere. However, the fact that we do not follow that cultural system, is quite different from moving to a position of doing something that is expressly forbidden. This concept will be clarified further in section 3.1.2 below where the wider witness of Scripture as a whole is covered. It should also be noted from Deuteronomy 25 that the brother had the right to decide not to marry the widow and that the sanction for this was a minor ticking-off.
- On the issue of punishment, we need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of the New Testament, where we see Jesus paying the price for sin ("the wages of sin is death"). So we now have a different way of dealing with the punishment for sin, but not a different view of what constitutes sin. To my knowledge, there is no Christian anywhere suggesting that the punishment for adultery, or homosexual sex, should be death. The statement in the Discussion Guide that "*if a literal reading of these proof texts is assumed as the basis for condemnation of homosexuality, it must be realised that Christians are then bound to advocate the execution of practising homosexuals*" is utterly preposterous in the light of Jesus Christ and the cross.

The third example is the statement in Leviticus 18:19 that forbids sex during the seven-day menstrual period. It is claimed that this is not observed today and therefore we should allow homosexual sex. I am not so sure that this is totally disregarded in all Christian households and still seems like a sensible regulation, even in modern times where women still have menstrual cycles. For some women, even in modern times, menstruation is an awkward and stressful time and a loving, Christian husband would be considerate towards her possible desire for privacy at this time.

On the whole this argument is very weak because it is saying that because we have disregarded the regulations, they have no meaning. That may be the opinion of those under regulation (as with many of us and speed restrictions), but the reality is that those who make the regulations have a different opinion. Man having disregarding one of God's regulations does not mean God, or the regulation, ceases to be of significance, it merely makes us wrong in the past, and wrong again now!

3.1.2 Second Approach to Reading Scripture

The Discussion Guide suggests the second approach to the reading of Scripture (i.e. other than just taking Scripture at its word) is "*to subject any particular biblical passage to the wider witness of Scripture as a whole*" so that "*no isolated text is allowed to hold an independent authority that is untempered by the witness of Scripture as a whole*".

Two specific themes that run throughout Scripture are quoted in the Discussion Guide.

- The biblical theology of inclusion – the fact that inclusion, not exclusion, characterises the nature of God's mission of love to the world. Of this there is no dispute as was indicated in the introduction – God accepts all, sinners and saints, and so should we as the church.
- The theme of the "*intrinsic dignity and sacred worth of all people, and the denunciation of all discrimination, oppression and injustice*". Once again there is no dispute regarding this theme being soundly biblical.

What is of concern is the implication that this somehow means that we should ignore sin as to be concerned over sin would be "*discrimination, oppression and injustice*". The clear implication of the Discussion Guide, although not specifically stated, is that to claim that homosexual sex is a sin is to ignore this theme. The argument presented is that "*it is important to recognise that there are parts of the Bible, such as the Gospels, that represent a fuller picture of the nature of God than other parts of the Bible, such as some Old Testament legal codes…. Therefore, any conclusions that are drawn from Scripture need to be consistent with what we know to be true about the nature and character of Christ*".

The real danger with this argument is that if everything we do and think is determined by only these two themes – inclusion and the intrinsic dignity and sacred worth of all people – we have a very secular gospel to present. How are we then any different to many of the secular organisations of this world – service organisations, gay and lesbian organisations etc? Surely as the Church, we have more to offer than merely inclusion and individual dignity.

What the Discussion Guide fails to acknowledge, is that there are more than two key themes that run throughout Scripture. One of these is that sin is separation from God, causes Him hurt and needs to be dealt with. Jesus knew this and highlighted it during His ministry:

- His response to the woman caught in adultery in John 8 was very clear: "Neither do I condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin".
- In Matthew 18 and Mark 9, He made it very clear that we should treat sin seriously when He said "*If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off*…." And also in Luke 17 where He says *"If your brother sins, rebuke him*".
- Jesus also frequently dealt with people that He healed with the words "*your sins are forgiven*". The clear intention was to highlight to people that there is more to life than good health, we need good spiritual health which requires us to face up to our sins.
- Of course, we cannot forget that the whole reason Jesus came to earth and died on the cross, was because He took our sin seriously and wanted to help us to deal with sin, not to sweep in under the carpet.

Another key theme in Scripture is that the only sexual activity that is affirmed in any way is loving, consensual sex between a single man and a single woman with the bounds of a marriage relationship. There is no affirmation for any other sexual activity. This point is explained very well by John Stott in his book on "Issues Facing Christians Today" where he deals with the question of homosexual partnerships in chapter 16.

Thus it must be noted that homosexual sex is not the subject of an "isolated text" in Scripture, as is implied by the Discussion Guide – there are texts in both the Old and New Testaments and a key theme running throughout the Bible (the affirmation of only marital sex).

Much more could be said on this topic but the point is that if we are going to look at the total revelation of the Scripture, lets not pick and choose only those themes that suit us best.

3.1.3 Third Approach to Reading Scripture

The third approach recommended in the Discussion Guide is "*to see the Bible as a living document in the life of the Church, which is enlivened by the activity of the Holy Spirit, who comes to interpret the words of Scripture and so to lead the Church into all truth, Sometimes this enlivened work of the Holy Spirit includes challenging entrenched assumptions and traditional interpretations, thus leading us to new and fuller understandings of the biblical witness*".

This, third approach, has frightening potential outcomes. In an Article titled "Mystical Paganism" by Revd. Dr Robert Saunders found on the Anglican Church website (Contact on-line, Volume 7 issue 10), Dr Saunders writes regarding comments made by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA, as follows:

> *The Presiding Bishop interprets this text (John 16:12) to mean that revelation will continuously unfold in the church, "in and through the life we share with one another". From this perspective, the real locus of revelation is the church, rather than the Scripture, and John 16:12 tells us this. As I shall show, the on-going knowledge given to the church supersedes the knowledge given in Scripture.*

This approach leads to crazy situations like the Jonestown massacre in 1978 where 900 members of the People's Temple were led to suicide by their leader. Jim Jones had founded his church on the basis of social and racial equality (progressive at the time) and they were well known for their work amongst the poor but eventually 'lost the plot' and descended into sexual promiscuity, beatings and extortion. Undoubtedly many of the teachings were not supported by Scripture, but the 'revelation was the church, rather than Scripture'.

We have no problem with challenging the interpretation of Scripture and even with vigorous debate on the subject, but that is a long way from taking the clearly stated words of Scripture and proclaiming them to be not true or no longer relevant!

Three specific examples are quoted in the Discussion Guide where the Church had to deal with a change in the assumption of the day.

The first example is the acceptance of gentiles by the early church in Acts 10-15. The argument that is made is that the Jewish Christians needed to be challenged to reach out to the gentiles, mainly through Peter's vision of the animals descending from heaven on a sheet.

An important point that needs to be clarified is that the revelation of God to the Jews throughout the whole Old Testament was that of being "blessed to be a blessing" to the whole world. In fact this very point is used elsewhere in the Discussion Guide to justify the theme of inclusion – "*From Abraham who was blessed so that all the peoples on earth might know the blessing of God also (Gen 12:2-3); to Israel whose very identity was understood as being God's servant people who would be a light for the Gentiles making known God's salvation to the ends of the earth (Is 42:6, 49:6)*…"

So, the reality is that God was merely bringing the Jewish Christians back to the original idea that was well documented in Scripture. Hardly a new revelation!

The second example quoted is the liberation of slaves and women. In the case of slavery, while it is clear that Scripture does not condemn slavery, it did place restrictions on owners of slaves that were the equivalent of the first Labour Relations Act. The move to abolish slavery was not a move to something specifically prohibited in Scripture and so cannot fairly be equated with accepting homosexual sex as being not sinful.

On the question of women, this is a clear example of two isolated texts appearing only in letters to churches and leaders and thus could possibly have been to address specific issues in those specific situations. Jesus clearly made a strong stand against excluding women in His dealings with the Samaritan women, where, by the way, He also dealt with her past and present sin.

The third example quoted is the fact that "*it is not the stated position of the MCSA to denounce unequivocally remarriage after divorce, and many Methodist ministers conduct marriages of divorcees*". The argument being made here is that we have changed one rule so why can't we change others!

Some people would argue that we got it wrong in the past. We certainly did with apartheid, which, by the way, used very similar arguments to those quoted in the Discussion Guide to get round those clear statements of Scripture that this was wrong.

Hopefully, those ministers who remarry divorcees spend some time with them dealing with the issues of their past marriage, including acknowledgement of some culpability, before the remarriage goes ahead. If that is the case, then we are admitting that swapping from marriage to marriage is not generally acceptable and that only in specific circumstances is remarriage acceptable. This does not sound as though we have eliminated the Scriptural concept at all.

May God protect us from thinking that anything supersedes the Word of God!

3.2 Other Arguments Expressed (not in the Discussion Guide)

Other arguments have been expressed in relation to the Biblical view of homosexual sex that are not expressed in the Discussion Guide, but are included here for completeness.

3.2.1 It's all about Love

The old 1960's notion that the only thing we need to worry about are Jesus' two commandments to "*love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself*" has made a comeback. The argument here is that the only criterion to judge anything on is love.

Thus it is concluded that a loving, monogamous homosexual sexual relationship is acceptable as it passes the love test. However, as John Stott points out, this would result in no argument "*against polygamy, for a polygamist could certainly enjoy a relationship with several wives which reflects all*" the characteristics of a loving relationship. He also highlights the fact that he has, on several occasions, counselled married men who have told him that they have fallen in love with another woman. In most cases they claim that "*we were made for each other. Our love for each other has a quality and depth we have never known before*". Does this make adultery and divorce acceptable because it passes the 'love test'?

John Stott adds "*Love needs law to guide it. In emphasising love for God and neighbour as the two great commandments, Jesus and His apostles did not discard all other commandments. On the contrary, Jesus said, 'If you love me you will keep my commandments,' and Paul wrote, 'Love is the fulfilment (not the abrogating) of the law'."*

To use love as the only guide to what is right and wrong is to deny most of the Scripture as being irrelevant. While love is an important aspect of evangelism, especially friendship evangelism, no one enters the kingdom of heaven through love alone – acknowledgement of sin and repentance are clearly defined in Scripture as key aspects of salvation.

3.2.2 The Biblical texts quoted are not really about homosexual love

Various people have proposed arguments which purport to show that the texts quoted above are not really talking about the experience of a long-term, loving, monogamous homosexual sexual relationship.

In dealing with these arguments, I will be leaning heavily on John Stott – a full account of his arguments are contained in his book.

a) The stories of Sodom and Gibeah

The arguments proposed here are that the real issue was hospitality and not sex at all. He word used in the original text is "know" and they were referring to getting acquainted with the visitors, not having sex. In addition, the rest of Scripture does not refer to Sodom's sin as being homosexual sex but as hypocrisy and social injustice (Isaiah), adultery, deceit and wickedness (Jeremiah) etc.

John Stott's summary argument is as follows:

- The adjectives "wicked", "vile" and "disgraceful" do not seem appropriate to describe a breach of hospitality.
- The offer of women instead "does look as if there is some sexual connotation to the episode".
- Although the word *yāḏa* (know) is only used 10 times (out of 943 in the Old Testament) to mean sexual intercourse, six of these occurrences are in Genesis and one in the Sodom story itself.
- For those of us who take the New Testament documents seriously, Jude's unequivocal reference to the "sexual immorality and perversion" of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude v7) cannot be dismissed as merely an error of copy.

In summary he states "*To be sure, homosexual behaviour was not Sodom's only sin; but according to Scripture it certainly was one of them*".

b) The Leviticus texts

The argument expressed is that the Leviticus texts are part of the Holiness Code and relate to ritual cleanliness and temple prostitution and not to the 'man in the street'. The religious practices have long since ceased, they say, and so the prohibitions are irrelevant.

The strange thing about this argument is that the other practices listed in the Code are still considered taboo. In Leviticus 18, these include (from a male perspective as written):

- Sex with a close relative.
- Sex with your mother.
- Sex with your step-mother.
- Sex with your sister.
- Sex with your granddaughter.
- Sex with your step-daughter.
- Sex with a woman and her daughter or granddaughter.
- Sex with another man.
- Sex with an animal.
- Sex with your neighbour's wife.

Interestingly only one of these is being singled out as now being acceptable. If we use the argument of religious cleanliness to throw one out, then surely we must throw them all out – there is little, if any justification for keeping the others if we disregard the one. This is taking the verse in context, considering it in terms of the verses that surround it.

Thus, using this argument, we end up in a situation where we will find it difficult to find fault with any sexual practice that is consensual, long-term and monogamous.

Romans text

The argument against Paul's statement in Romans is that these relate to idolatrous pagans in the Graeco-Roman world of his day. It seems a clear condemnation of homosexual sex but two arguments against that conclusion are proposed:

- Paul did not understand the modern understanding that some homosexuals have a natural inclination towards homosexual sex so they are not doing anything unnatural (to them).
- The portrayal of homosexual sex is that of promiscuity and thus not related to loving, long-term relationships.

The first point is discussed in section 3.2.3 below.

On the second point, this is only potentially relevant if taken in isolation. However, when taken in the context of the revelation of the whole of Scripture, where the only sexual expression affirmed is that in heterosexual, monogamous marriage, then one cannot exclude this Scripture on the basis of limited applicability.

The same argument for exclusion can be used for many of the principles we adhere to in our doctrine.

3.2.3 Homosexuals have no choice, it's the way God made them

The argument is that people have a natural inclination to homosexuality that is programmed into their genes and thus they are just following the way God made them and doing what is natural for them.

John Stott highlights that fact that what is natural is not determined by what people are inclined to do. The correct definition of natural is according to God's plan and design for creation. In this context we see, through the totality of Scripture, that God designed for a man and a woman joined together in a sacrament of marriage, as the natural vehicle for sexual activity.

If we start to use other arguments about what is natural, i.e. “It is found in nature” or “It is the way I am”, then we start to set our standards by what happens in the world or by what animals do. God has a special place for humans and it is surely way above what animals do, and history tells us that man is very poor at determining what is good for him (going back all the way to Adam). Child pornographers, child molesters and many murderers also make use of the argument that it is something that is just “built in to them” which they cannot resist.

Dr James Dobson deals with this issue most eloquently in his book, Solid Answers, where, in answer to question number 477, he states:

> *The homosexual activist community would have us believe that because their behaviour is genetically programmed and beyond their control, it is morally defensible. This is not supportable. Most men have inherited a lust for women. Their natural tendency is to have sex with as many beautiful girls as possible, both before marriage and after. Abstinence before marriage and monogamy afterward are accomplished by discipline and commitment. If men did what they are genetically programmed to do, most would be sexually promiscuous from about fourteen years of age onward. Would that make such behaviour any less immoral? Of course not.*
>
> *What if a paedophile could claim that he inherited his lust for kids? He could make a good case for it. Certainly his sexual apparatus and the testosterone that drives it are creations of genetics. Even if his perversion resulted from early experiences, he could accurately claim not to have chosen to be what he is. But so what? Does this make his abuse of children any less offensive? ….*
>
> *What if it could be demonstrated conclusively that alcoholics inherit a chemical vulnerability to alcohol? Such is probably the case, since some races have a higher incidence of alcoholism than others. But so what? Does this mean that alcoholism is any less a problem for those families and for society in general? Hardly!*
>
> *I hope the point is apparent. Being genetically inclined to do immoral things does not make immorality right.*

In addition we do need to acknowledge that though man is made in the image of God, we are not born the way God intended us to be. The simple reason for this is that we are all born sinful, and that is not the way God intended us to be! This is confirmed by the following Scriptures:

> *Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* (Psalm 51:5)
>
> *Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies.* (Psalm 58:3)

3.3 Conclusion

It should by now be clear that the Bible has a definite stand on sexual acts. The only sexual act affirmed is loving, consensual sex between one man and one woman within the bonds of marriage, and no other sexual activity is affirmed in any way in Scripture, “*the only sufficient rule of a Christian’s faith and practice*”.

There are also clear texts, which cannot be argued away, that state that homosexual sex is not acceptable to God.

It was mentioned above that out of the list of detestable sexual practices in Leviticus 18, only one is being singled out as being possibly acceptable. In truth the only reason it is being considered as possibly acceptable is that the world now finds it acceptable. There is nothing in Scripture to make homosexual sex, out of the whole list, acceptable and we are thus using the standards of this world, to try to set the standards for God. Thus the standard is being set by what is ‘normative today’ rather than by ‘Biblical injunction’.

In reality, nothing we decide will change anything in God’s eyes. He certainly does not need our guidance and ‘wisdom’ to clarify things for him. He also does not need us to help Him understand the realities of homosexual persuasion and the challenges that face homosexuals, He knew all that when He had the Old Testament written. We would be best to just follow God rather than try to argue our way out of anything that confronts us.

In addition the Discussion Guide effectively makes the argument that one needs complex argument and deep knowledge to understand the plain words of Scripture. This ends up in a dangerous situation where the meaning of the Bible is no longer available to the ordinary man. Only the 'learned', it would seem, are able to grasp the correct meaning of Scripture. The Church was once in that position before – it was called the Dark Ages. Please let us not make access to God's Word through the Scriptures so complex that simple people are excluded from understanding it or applying it to their lives.

Michael Cassidy, founder of African Enterprise, writing in Today magazine (October 2003) summarises it as follows:

> *Consider God's institution of marriage in the first chapters of Genesis, where it is clear He created male and female for one another. Study the words of Jesus in Matthew 19, where Jesus reaffirms the Genesis story and talks about God's creation of the two sexes and His purpose for their union together. Jesus makes no mention of, nor affirms, any other kind of sexual expression.*
>
> *Through these and many other examples, we find that the Old and New Testaments are unwaveringly emphatic that our sexuality is designed to be expressed between one man an one woman within a committed marriage relationship. That, I believe, is where we need to stand clearly and emphatically, as well as humbly and with great compassion for all who struggle experientially with their own sexual 'orientation'.*

Or as John Stott so eloquently puts it: "*There can be no liberation from God's created norms; true liberation is found only in accepting them*".

4. The Way Forward

So where does all this lead us? Hopefully to a place where we can all find a common understanding of acceptance and inclusion.

The Discussion Guide deals quite strongly with the prejudice and judgmental attitudes towards homosexuals that have characterised the church for the past 40 or so years, in the section entitled Tradition. We would affirm the paragraph quoted in the Discussion Guide from the United Methodist Church's Social Principles statement on human sexuality:

> *Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfilment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.*

We would assert that the road we as a church should follow, is to deal in the strongest possible way with prejudice and judgmental attitudes, rather than trying to determine that homosexual sex is not sinful.

Moving to a position of direct contradiction to the clear word of God is an extremely dangerous, and we believe, disobedient move that will ultimately lead to an erosion of any kind of standards of Christian behaviour.

We should instead focus on those areas where we are in direct disobedience to the clear word of Scripture. This whole debate has highlighted that prejudice is one such area.

4.1 Prejudice

There can be no place for prejudice amongst God's people. Have we forgotten that we are all sinful and unworthy of any of God's great grace and riches - lay, clergy, saved and unsaved? How dare we now pretend that we are acceptable and others not!

This prejudice applies to many groupings:

- Homosexuals
- Other races
- Lay people who are made to feel unworthy by some clergy
- Alcoholics
- Beggars, hobos and other 'undesirables'

In so many ways all of these groups feel excluded and unwelcome as a result of our prejudice. This is clearly contrary to the teachings of Jesus and results in people being doomed as a result of not hearing the gospel. If the church were to mount a strong campaign against prejudice so that all members, lay and clergy, were in no doubt about the evil and sinfulness of prejudice, then there would be overwhelming support.

This should be our focus.

4.2 Leadership

Having said that we should be accepting of all people, sinners and saints, we need to clarify the position on leadership.

The Bible makes it very clear that God has special expectations of leadership:

- Throughout the Old Testament, Israel was constantly swayed to and fro by a succession of good and bad leaders. The bad leaders were dealt with most harshly by God and they took more blame for leading the people astray than the people did for following them.
- Jesus was especially hard on the religious leaders of the day.
- Jesus highlighted his demand for leaders to be servants to the people in the washing of the disciples' feet.
- Paul highlighted the specific requirements of leaders as including living a godly life and having a clear conscience:

> *An elder must not be a new Christian, because he might be proud of being chosen so soon, and the Devil will use that pride to make him fall. Also, people outside the church must speak well of him so that he will not fall into the Devil's trap and be disgraced.*
> *In the same way, deacons must be people who are respected and have integrity. They must not be heavy drinkers and must not be greedy for money. They must be committed to the revealed truths of the Christian faith and must live with a clear conscience. Before they are appointed as deacons, they should be given other responsibilities in the church as a test of their character and ability. If they do well, then they may serve as deacons.* (1 Timothy 3:6-10, NLT)

The standards for leadership are more demanding than those expected of non-leaders and we need to take great care to select leaders who lead not only by their words but also by their lifestyle, a lifestyle committed to the fundamental precepts of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For this reason, we do not believe it is appropriate for anyone wilfully living a sinful lifestyle to be in leadership within the Methodist Church. This includes those wilfully living lives of adultery, abusive behaviour towards spouse or children, drunkards, fraudsters and those engaging in homosexual sex. This stand is the clear injunction of Scripture.

Document drafted by Dave Bentley