

The Gay Conundrum

- a personal Christian response

by

John Barber

“Truth is like the sun. You can shut it out for a time, but it ain't goin' away.” **Elvis Presley**

“Gay people should be integrated into society instead of ostracized ... If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?” **Pope Benedict XVI**

ISBN 978-0-9537306-5-0

Fourth Edition: April 2014

Published by: John Barber, Southend, England

While the author will not commit to entering into correspondence, he would be happy to receive and respond to useful feedback concerning this paper and hopes it will stimulate helpful discussion and action.

Copyright © John Barber 2014 - all rights reserved

Contents

The Gay Conundrum.....	3
Providing the context.....	3
Setting the scene.....	4
A right gay theology.....	6
Down to the nitty gritty.....	10
A measured response.....	15
Considering the story of Sodom.....	17
Questions for discussion.....	17
First time round reflections.....	18
The “Lepers” conference.....	19
Are same sex relationships sinful?.....	20
Equal marriage and gay marriage?.....	21
And so it continues - further thoughts.....	24
A tribute to a friend.....	30
The “gay texts”.....	31

Note: it was my intention that this paper (book) would eventually be incorporated in a later edition of a book I wrote earlier: “Outside the Camp”, as it complements what I had already written, but now it is part of a sequel. I have made several additions since the previous version of this paper and re-released it in the light of the Bill put forward by the UK government to Parliament for approval and now enacted in law, which legalises same sex marriage, as well as other significant developments. I do so with a view to contributing to the ongoing debate around homosexuality and how Christians should address the issues, both respectfully and robustly, while continuing effectively to operate in the public square. When I first wrote this as an article, it was aimed at Christians. Given my decision to include it in a book meant for both Christians and non-Christians, I did consider rewriting it. However, on reflection, I felt most of what I wrote still applies, even though my views on the subject are constantly being challenged. Things have moved on again, contained in what follows. Being “all things to all men” is often an unattainable, albeit worthy, goal, yet I have sought to engage those who think differently to me. Since writing the original article, the size of this paper has doubled as a result of ongoing reflection and dialogue and significant changes in the current culture.

The Gay¹ Conundrum

Providing the context

I have a bizarre habit: whenever I hear someone speak or write on a subject that interests me, I try to work out, from what is said or written, what has motivated that person and his or her worldview. The reader may well work out “where I come from”, but, hopefully, with surprises too. I hope people won’t be put off, despite likely being taken outside of their comfort zones. The perspectives on offer are personal ones but also biblically based, as that for me has to be the final arbiter of what is true. My own world view is Judaeo-Christian. My theology is historical Christianity, Evangelical and Reformed, with a special interest in community action. I am heterosexual and married with a son, who I love. I have some inkling and experience of struggles some folk have with matters of sexuality and acceptance. I care a lot about social justice and recognize its pertinence to this subject. I have written for Christians, many of whom will have perspectives different to what I am about to present, and also for gay people (recognizing some are also Christian). The views are offered respectfully and hoping we will all gain a better understanding.

Now I am rapidly approaching the age people are expected to retire, I realize the need to pass on the baton to the next generation and leave a worthwhile legacy. I feel compelled to concentrate on things that matter and I am savvy enough (I hope) to know how not to unduly upset people (despite often managing to do so). I am past caring enough to say what needs saying, without fear or favour. I suspect there will be repercussions and backlash to what I write, but the writing on this subject is too important not to allow for such a possibility. It is important for Christians to manifest the authentic love of God, by serving a diverse community with a plethora of needs, to a generation that too often views Christians in a negative light.

Yet I fear, as a nation (Great Britain), we have wandered far from God’s law. With the rise of militant secularism, acceptance of ideas that all cultures are equivalent and with equal opportunities put before doing right, the trend looks set to continue, with dire consequences, unless there is a turning back to God. The issue of how same-sex relationships should be viewed is a small part of the wider issue of human sexuality, which itself is one issue of many where Christians, among others, might be expected to hold and expound views. In recent years, the way people view the subject of homosexuality, especially if taking a more traditional line, may

¹ In this account “gay” refers to any who are lesbian, bisexual, gay (homosexual) or transsexual (LBGT)

determine their acceptance within society. Since I am convinced that Christians can and should play their full part in the community, and yet not compromise when on matters of conscience, is a further reason why I write as I do.

Finally, while the work is my own, I value the conversations I have had with people that touch on these matters – Christians with various beliefs and gay folk, some of which may be Christian, alike. Every week new stories break that relate to some conflict between Christian and gay priorities as to how life ought to be lived in this country. Often these have considerable consequences. I read what Christian commentators, like Christian Concern, write, as well as gay commentators, like Pink News (and its reader comments section), and I am grateful for the information and insights they offer as they inform a lot of what follows.

Setting the scene

There was a time, not long ago, when one could have ignored the subject of homosexuality and it would not have made much of a difference. Few would have admitted to being homosexual; the issue did not affect most of us and homosexual activity was generally looked down upon in society and invariably kept strictly private. Up to 1967, it was deemed to be criminal. How times have changed!

While homosexuals might still be subject to discrimination and consider they are not always treated equally to heterosexuals, enormous steps have been made in the areas of acceptability and equality. Many more have come out as being gay, often among those we know and love; society nowadays accepts gay relationships in a way that would not have been thought possible a short time ago, and the “equalities” agenda and further moves toward the secularization of society means those questioning the appropriateness of such relationships are now more likely to be in the minority and even castigated. Churches, once tending to be critical of homosexual relationships, or silent on the matter, are now more likely to go along with changes in society. Changes in the way homosexuality is viewed, and expectations regarding gay rights, present a challenge for churches as to how they ought to respond. While one might wish to ignore the subject, it is impossible to do so, and neither should Christians, if we wish to (and we should) be socially active, serving the wider community, particularly if doing so in a partnership paradigm.

Among Christians, a range of views exists. Some, particularly those of a more liberal persuasion, would consider it perfectly OK to be in a gay relationship, and are quick to distance themselves from anything remotely deemed to be homophobic or that could be seen as discriminatory. Some, particularly among Evangelicals and

Catholics, may find the whole idea of gay sex, and with it the “unnaturalness” of the sex act, abhorrent, feeling that the promotion of gay rights undermines firmly held beliefs, and will say so, sometimes vociferously. Some adopt an “in-between” position. Some do not give the subject all that much thought and are inclined to toe the line espoused by their particular church or denomination, or, more likely, society in general. Some speak and act without giving much thought concerning the implications of any offence they might cause. Some, rather than endure ridicule or censure or conflict, ignore changes happening or “go with the flow” and succumb to the pressure to do so. Here, we examine issues around the gay rights agenda and suggest a Christian response to the “gay conundrum”, sensitive to the complexities and sensibilities that arise when issues are raised.

Given my own position is that of a Bible-believing Christian with more traditional views (and, for some gay folk, we are seen as the main enemy to full LBGT equality), I have no intention of being swept along by the spirit of the age, which too often can be seen as contrary to the will of God, and accepting *carte blanche* what once was considered unacceptable, yet neither do I wish to endorse bigotry, ignorance, prejudice or a lack of charity, and will suggest a “better way”. I sometimes wonder if those Christians who protest at gay pride marches might do better if they were to run free tea and cake stalls and serve the marchers!

Gay folk may feel angry when Christians demonize yet speak condescendingly to them, *e.g.* talking about hating the sin and loving the sinner, or appear judgmental and obsessed with homosexuality compared to other “sins”, or denigrate what for gay folk is a natural expression of their love for their partner, or suggest that they could or should change their sexual preference. They may argue that gay rights is merely one aspect of human rights and all such rights need to be safeguarded. Christians have not always responded wisely or sensitively to these issues, or to the people affected, and may need to change their way of thinking and attitudes. While our calling as Christians is to follow Christ in simple faith and obedience, that does not mean we adopt a “head in the sand” attitude to the difficult questions of life that arise, and is why I wish to, respectfully and robustly, present these thoughts.

The issues around homosexuality can appear complex, especially when clear answers to difficult questions are not readily forthcoming. Sadly, when discussing these issues, positions can become quickly polarized. Christians, especially those of a more traditional and dogma driven ilk, can react strongly if it is suggested that some or many of the issues raised by gay folk, especially around fair treatment, are valid or when their beliefs in the inappropriateness of gay relationships are challenged. They might bemoan society’s obsession with political correctness and

as not addressing real problems while discarding its Christian heritage and ignoring the importance that once was attached to following God's righteous precepts.

In similar fashion; gay folk can react strongly when gay relationships are criticized, or portrayed in a poor light, or seen as sinful, or when discrimination is deemed to have taken place, or when Christians appear obsessed with what takes place in the bedroom or biblical authority is blindly invoked. Often, myths and misinformation are perpetuated by all sides of the argument. While the nature of the issues around homosexual practice can make entrenched positions virtually unavoidable (giving rise to the conundrum referred to in the title), there is much to be gained if different sides of the debate could better understand the other's position and seek common middle ground, based on our shared humanity and, without stereotyping, beliefs in social justice and the need for aesthetic appreciation and personal sensitivity.

Finally, what I write, in particular the examples given below, is from a UK perspective. While the gay rights agenda has made significant headway in recent years in western countries, and it looks set to continue, in many non-western countries to be a practising homosexual can still attract opposition and sometimes severe persecution, where homophobia is not just a matter of fearing and hating gay people but being decidedly hostile toward them. What is offered here is work in progress and done in the hope that it will be helpful to those who want to gain greater understanding. As each side holds different axioms, some differences will inevitably remain irresolvable, yet it is hoped some coming together of opposites might still result. While what is written relates to the present situation, often quite different to what it was 25 years ago or what it might be in 25 years time, yet because truth is timeless, many of the points raised here will remain relevant.

A right gay theology

While, in my experience, many Christians do not think theologically and do not always base their beliefs and actions on what God says, it is beholden on believers to do so, even when the complexity and messiness of living in the real world creates enormous challenges. Regrettably, few theologians and preachers speak from a position of entire truth and balance. That does not let us off the hook. While I would rather take my lead from what God says is right than accept the *status quo*, I must not ignore what is happening around me and need to apply the truth, balanced with love, to each issue I face. This is fundamental to my understanding of Christian discipleship. While I would not ignore two thousand years of church tradition, my starting point has to be the Bible, which I regard as infallible. While the Bible teaches truth, truth can also be found from other sources too, including

scientific observation, what can be clearly seen or deduced from all around us and in the thoughts and opinions of other people, including unbelievers. Truth must be sought out at all costs and Christians ought not to be intimidated by secularists who wrongly claim that they alone have the truth and then deride those that disagree.

When it comes to the subject of homosexuality, it seems the Bible says surprisingly little on the subject. While what it does say has traditionally been interpreted as teaching homosexual practice is sinful, there have been those who have argued that is not the case. As I reflect on the scriptures and the arguments these people present, I am prepared to concede there may be less than is often thought that unequivocally condemns homosexual practice, especially if part of a stable, loving, committed relationship. However, what I do not concede is the creation ordinance for a man and a woman to come together “as one” as a lifetime commitment (Genesis 2v24). Such teaching was reinforced by Jesus himself (Matthew 19v3-12).

While this begs the question of the Bible’s seeming acceptability of polygamy (something practiced by men God approved, *e.g.* Abraham, Jacob, David), “forced” marriage, *e.g.* regarding rape victims, and divorce, sadly prevalent in our society, including among Christians, nowhere do I find same-sex sexual relationships being given divine approval, or of marriage, the essential building-block for society and the nurture of children, regarded as anything other than between one man and one woman, and for life. The coming together and uniting of opposites has profound symbolic significance since it portrays the union of Christ and the Church. However unpalatable these notions are in society, particularly by those who today influence its laws and opinions, this is the truth that Christians need to declare.

If we then extrapolate that those sexual relationships outside traditionally defined marriage are missing God’s purposes for humankind, or even sinful if we are to be blunt, we need to do so on the understanding that we are all sinners and we are all called to repent from our sin. Nowhere do I find that homosexual sin is regarded (by God) as worse than heterosexual sin, *e.g.* having sexual relationships outside of marriage, or any other sin come to that, including the sins of omission, like neglecting the plight of the poor. After all, God is holy beyond all our imagination and hates all sin. Sadly, there is a tendency in some Christian circles to emphasize certain sins over others. We do not have the mandate to do this. Moreover, as hard as it may be for some to accept, some are attracted to members of their own, rather than the opposite sex, and, while this is normally the result of a conscious decision made in teenage or later life, sometimes this may have always been the case.

Close same-sex relationships can be wonderful, as seen in the Bible account of the friendship between David and Jonathan, although there is no evidence that their relationship was more than platonic. Some have speculated on the relationship between Jesus and *the disciple whom Jesus loved* and that of the centurion and his “servant”, whom Jesus healed, but we must not read more into this than we should. We can’t explain why some are attracted, particularly physically, to their own rather than opposite sex, other than maybe in the context of the Fall and our sinful nature. Whether it is nurture or nature, or a mixture, who can say and does it matter? I believe it is not wrong to prefer members of one’s own sex, providing, as with all relationships outside marriage, it does not involve lust or sexual intimacy.

The main reason I give why it is not right to have sexual relations with members of one’s own sex is that God has not said it is right and (more likely) he has said it is wrong. While I have come to see that many texts Christians quote to condemn homosexuality may not actually do so, most seem to show it in a negative light. I understand, for some, such distinctions may be painful but I can not go beyond what the Bible says, and believe God will always give grace, to those who sincerely seek to obey his will, to do so. While it may be possible to change ones sexual orientation, for some this might never happen and therefore they would be expected to live celibate lives (as would anyone who is not married). God’s promise to bless the “eunuch” (outsider) who follows him is surely relevant here (Isaiah 56: 3-5).

A further theological consideration is how Christians are to live in the world. Time does not allow us to consider the contentious debates that have gone on around this subject for two thousand years. While it might be desirable to live in a society where Christian values are accepted, most don’t enjoy that privilege and some have to face hostile opposition. Even in the UK, where a strong Judaeo-Christian societal consensus once existed, many of its traditional values are now being ditched. While Christians are headed for a better place and our primary interest should be the Kingdom that is to come, we are still called to live and do good in the world, with all its contradictions, and exercise godly influence where we can. Even though it is hard to prescribe how best to “*love thy neighbour*”, that is our calling. Together with loving God, if these two great commandments are truly practised, it may be all the theology one needs. While some Christians focus on family, business and church life, it should not end there, as the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates.

Knowing, speaking and acting in accordance with the truth, in the community where we are placed, is an important way in which we can serve. For that reason, these questions need to be addressed, while recognizing that darker forces may for a time hold sway. We are called to obey the law of the land and submit to its

institutions, even when it seems that Christians and Christian teaching is becoming marginalized. The only exception is when in order to obey God we may have to disobey the law. I do not believe we are necessarily being forced to make that choice now but the time may come when we will have to. If we suffer as a result, then that is our calling and we must do so gracefully so that God's will is done.

At the heart of the conundrum, as far as Christians are concerned, is how we can pray (as many do each day), "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done*", yet fail to challenge those things that would seem to prevent God's will from being done. There have been instances when civil government has sought to govern according to divine principles, often supported by Christians (some would argue that was once the case in our own country, but not so nowadays) yet never with complete success. Always there have been inconsistencies and instances when God's will has not been done; for example, instances of social injustice toward one or other group in society. It is not a laudable aim, in my view, for Christians to seek or expect theocratic government, at least not until Christ personally returns to this earth. However, it is right to want and work toward government applying virtuous principles because "*righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people*" (Proverbs 14:34), and, more poignantly, to do good whenever we can.

For the good of society, we need to uphold the rights of all its members and allow, wherever possible, equal opportunity and recourse under law for all of its citizens, even though there are many other things that also ought to be considered. We need to respect, honour and, if at all possible, live in peace with all humanity. People's rights should generally only be curtailed when the law is broken or when it harms others. Combating discrimination against gay folk is important, whether by law or by some more effective means (if these can be found). Yet, it is better this is not done while sanctioning unrighteousness (not always an easy call) or denying the truth. While I look forward to the coming of the Kingdom, when righteousness will prevail, I know this will only completely happen with the coming of the King.

We need to consider the implications these issues have for the Church (all Christian believers) and individual churches (local congregations). While we may be despondent when we perceive what goes on in churches, including our own, as falling far short of what we would want or expect, the inescapable reality is the Church is of paramount importance as far as God is concerned. The Church is not an organization one can join by baptism, or any other ritual or process, but rather it requires the personal faith and repentance of its individual members in its head (Christ). It is the Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, a building inhabited by his Spirit and his instrument to reach out to and bless the world. How churches deal

with sinners is important. We are all sinners and the churches need to preach the gospel, calling sinners to repent and put their faith in Christ, and serve people, whatever their status or views. This applies to gay folk and non-gay folk alike. We are all in the same boat. We all need to be saved. Sometimes Christians are too embarrassed to preach the gospel, yet this is “*the power of God unto salvation*”.

We must encourage those who respond to the gospel call to live as faithful disciples of Jesus, living as God would want us. This includes serving the community in which we are placed, seeking to be a blessing to all. Without being patronizing (for this can irritate gay folk), we are called to love sinners (including speaking God’s word to them) yet hate sin, just as God does. This has many implications, including showing unconditional love in a way that meets real, practical needs, and exercising appropriate (compassionate and firm) discipline and teaching within the churches. Given gay folk may well be found in our churches (and we should be warm and welcoming), an understanding of the issues raised here will be helpful, just as is a greater appreciation of God himself and his purpose for our lives.

Regarding theology, it has to be admitted there are many difficulties that might be faced when coming to terms with all the teachings of the Bible. As a result, some will choose to reinterpret or dismiss certain sections or even abandon altogether any notion of divine inspiration. Often these will be pointed out in discussion, sometimes in order to discredit the basis of Christian belief. The right approach is to admit when we do not have the answers. For example, no one has fully answered the question, “Why do innocent people suffer”? Because I am confident the Bible contains God’s instructions and he is utterly trustworthy and all-powerful, I believe many of the difficulties can be resolved, and personally (I believe) I have resolved many while still struggling with some. Debating the difficulties can be a distraction from considering important issues but also we need to be humble when we respond.

Down to the nitty gritty

When I entered full time into community work around 2000, I was involved in setting up a project which involved partnering a voluntary group (I was part of), comprising (at the time) mostly members of churches, with the local authority, “service users” and other interested parties. One of my early jobs was to write its equal opportunities policy (insisted upon by our main partner), which included a statement along the lines: “we do not discriminate according to a person’s age, race, religion, disability, sex and sexual orientation”. It was my first exposure to what has become in some places a significant issue. For us, it did not become an issue, for we just got on doing what we had to do (in this case, helping people who

were experiencing mental health issues), although I would be complacent if I did not think that more could have been done to involve each of the six groups mentioned. I believe, in the projects in which I subsequently became involved, we have avoided discriminating knowingly against anyone for any reason and have genuinely sought to foster a culture of equal opportunities, where all are valued.

At the time, I had reservations about sexual orientation because of my priorities and religious views but have come to see that sexual orientation (although not practice) entails less of a choice than does religion. But I recognized the need to address this issue although I refused to incorporate a statement, by a similar project at the time, to elaborate on the point, with words to the effect that we treat same-sex partnerships on an equal basis as marriage, because I believed then (and still do) that traditionally defined marriage stands alone as being of premier importance. Since then, the idea of anti-discrimination has been enshrined in law, most recently the 2010 Equality Act (which readers are encouraged to study and understand).

I have seen examples of discrimination in all the equality areas and recognize gay folk are particularly hard hit. I agree that it is often unjust to discriminate and that it is something we should want to see eradicated, and sometimes legislation is needed to achieve this. My only caveat would be that, when the Kingdom of God is fully manifested, righteousness will prevail and this should take precedence. One concern, although not one I had direct involvement in, is with faith-based organizations, where it might seem reasonable to employ those for certain positions who are members of that faith in order to maintain the organization's faith ethos. This remains a contentious issue and one our subject only touches upon. The sentiment toward anti-discrimination, along with gay rights, has, however, contributed in bringing about a significant degree of conflict, as demonstrated by a number of recent high profile cases (well documented by organizations such as Christian Concern and the Christian Institute), for example:

1. A relationship counsellor lost his job because he asked not to have to counsel a same-sex couple on how they might be able to improve their sex life. This decision was upheld on appeal to an employment tribunal.
2. Two bed-and-breakfast owners refused to accommodate a gay couple in a double bedroom, even despite having previously declared they would only allow this for married couples. They were taken to court and were fined.
3. A Catholic adoption agency had to close down because it refused to place children that were ready for adoption with same-sex couples.

4. A Christian couple, with a good record for fostering, were turned down, when seeking to foster more children by their local authority, after they admitted that they would not tell a child that it is OK to be gay.
5. A civil registrar lost her job after requesting she be excused from conducting civil partnership ceremonies involving same-sex couples.
6. An open-air preacher was arrested after a gay man informed the police that he found some of what the preacher said to be personally insulting.

Some would say that these happenings are acceptable as a line needs to be drawn in order to combat discrimination against gay folk. They might also point out that while understanding Christians want to act according to their conscience, they often do not act consistently when they direct their actions against gay folk and not other “sinners”. For example, would the relationship counsellor counsel mixed-sex couples who are not married or the civil registrar conduct marriages of divorcees who have been refused marriage by the church? The Christian retort is often that conscience is indeed the important issue and we cannot do what our conscience disallows and are perturbed that the respect once given to Christianity is now not only no longer being afforded, but that gay rights are trumping Christian rights and a better balance is needed. Moreover, it is invariably never the intention to offend or discriminate and relevant services can usually readily be obtained elsewhere.

Alleged areas of “gay discrimination” concern marriage, fostering and adoption. Some gay couples have expressed a desire to marry (until March 2014 when same sex couples will be able to legally marry, only civil partnership being open to them and many see this as inferior to marriage) and they feel they should be entitled to the same opportunities as heterosexual couples. They claim that being allowed to marry should not be seen as a threat to heterosexual marriage, and point to studies in countries where gay marriage has been adopted which proves the point. They could even suggest those concerned should be looking instead at the high divorce rate among heterosexual couples. The current government is committed to introducing same-sex marriage following the recent consultation.

Some Christians respond by saying that marriage was only ever meant for heterosexual couples and to allow gay couples to marry would undermine this most important of institutions, meant for the coming together of opposites, and that the redefining of marriage will lead to further societal disintegration. Traditional marriage has stood the test of time immemorial and until relatively recently has been widely accepted as the only union recognized by society, with strong such marriages being essential for healthy societies and the nurturing of children.

Regarding adoption and fostering, some gay couples feel they should be allowed to foster and adopt, not just because disallowing them would be discriminatory, but that they would make good parents and provide everything a heterosexual couple might be expected to provide, for example a happy, safe and secure home, where the child is loved and looked after. As for needing good other sex role models, this can be provided by friends and other family members. Some Christians point out that the welfare of the children involved should be the main consideration and that children being placed with traditionally married couples is the appropriate setting and is in the best interest when it comes to their future welfare.

A further area of contention regards what happens in schools. While there are wider issues around what is taught concerning relationships, sex education and values generally, insisting children are taught that homosexual relationships are entirely acceptable will raise concerns. The controversy around Section 28, introduced in 1988 by the Conservative government to prohibit the intentional promotion of homosexuality in schools, reflects much of the passion and polarization of positions by various interested parties. This was repealed in 2003 by the Labour government.

One concern was that by applying Section 28, it prevented reasonable and needful discussion on the subject. Our current Prime Minister has since apologized for and distanced himself from the actions taken by his predecessors from his own party. What is taught in schools regarding homosexuality may remain a bone of contention for some time to come. It does appear, in state schools at least, that it may not be possible to offer views, such as expressed here, as a corrective to the more accepting views, *i.e.* “it is ok to be gay”, that seem to be favoured by the powers that be. While this is one example of the battle that is taking place in our culture, what can’t be denied are the documented instances of insidious homophobic bullying, which not only result in distress for the victim but, in extreme cases, suicide. How we combat this ought to concern us all.

The issue of whether there are health issues concerning homosexuality and how to address these is a contentious one, *e.g.* relating to AIDS and mental health. Studies appear inconclusive on the matter and often biased. Some gay folk argue a major reason for mental health issues, *e.g.* depression, is to do with the associated stigma. Since writing the first draft of this chapter, a number of new cases have come to light, and this trend looks set to continue. (It should be noted though that we do not possess all the facts and therefore cannot always come to a fully worked out view):

1. An employee of a housing association was demoted, with considerable reduction in salary, because he had made known his opposition to same-sex marriage on Facebook social media. The association justified its decision saying the employee brought its good name into disrepute and broke its code of conduct (although the evidence seems tenuous at best). Some support for the employee has come from Peter Tatchell, the gay rights activist, who regarded the action as “excessive and disproportionate”. The employee is making a legal claim against his employers and we await the outcome.
2. A board member of one of the branches of the Citizens Advice Bureau, a prominent Christian, was not voted back into office and the reason given was his public opposition to same-sex marriage and that it would undermine the CAB’s commitment to equal opportunities. A counter is that this does not follow. While some would argue that the CAB is entitled to appoint who they wish, others would point out this is yet a further example of pandering to fear that seems to prevail when gay rights are claimed to be threatened, and is ironic given the important contributions Christians have made.
3. A prominent Christian, actively engaging politically and in other ways in the public square, wrote an article condemning gay activists for seeking to impose their views and decrying the fact that people, including Christians, too often give in, when they ought to withstand. He likened the situation to what occurred in 1930’s Germany under Nazism and likened the gay activists (the “Gaystapo”) to the Gestapo. This has given rise to significant offence in the gay community and a hate crime claim is being investigated.

The “Gaystapo” incident illustrates some of the key issues being played out today. On balance, I believe the analogy was unwise and the language used intemperate, if only because of the unnecessary offence it has caused gay folk and that it detracted from a valid point being made. One of my heroes and sources of inspiration is the German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He saw the evil and dangers of Nazism early on and stayed in Germany for much of the period, when he continued to warn the people, and did so at great personal risk. He was executed for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler in the later days of World War Two. I wonder whether, if more people had followed his example or heeded his warnings, the outcome would have been a lot different and many innocent lives could have been saved? As it was, good people, including many who were Christians, looking for a better life and seeking to appease the tyrant, capitulated, and the rest, as they say, is history.

A measured response

For a number of years, my work has meant that I get involved with a wide cross-section of the community where I live. I recall an incident that occurred in a diversity event I was organizing. A gay friend was quite upset when he picked up a booklet from the Muslim stall. It presented as its central theme that AIDS was the judgement of God on homosexuals, as well as making a number of propositions that were not evidence based. While I knew where the writer of the booklet was coming from, having heard similar statements from Christians, I was keen to check out the various assertions my friend found unacceptable. I ran it by a Christian doctor friend, who pointed out some inaccurate statements in the booklet, and a Muslim doctor friend, who I approached, also agreed. While my gay friend was disgruntled, and remains so to this day, at least an attempt was made to clear the air and separate fact from fiction. I believe this should always be our approach.

In my discussions with gay folk about some of the issues relating to homosexuality, I have sometimes referred them to Christian websites (of the more thoughtful and less rabid variety) that purport to address the issues. Sometimes they came back challenging what they had found and often this was about matters around the health and wellbeing of those who adopt a “homosexual lifestyle” (I use the term advisedly, mindful that some gay folk find it offensive). I do not claim in-depth knowledge in these areas, which is why I value resources that can help me when I engage in debate, especially as I am keen to establish facts. I regard myself as a layman when presented with conflicting evidence, or assertions not evidence based, or theological interpretations not corresponding to my own biblical understanding.

Christians can do great disservice if making unsubstantiated assertions, although I also recognize considerable societal pressure may be brought to bear on those that assert being actively gay might be detrimental to health and wellbeing. There is no excuse for not presenting all the facts in a balanced way or refusing to respond when challenged. Many gay folk are taken in by a secularist worldview and disdain of the Bible. Some do believe, recognizing and struggling with the conflict between their way of life and what the church teaches or, urged on by misguided Christian teachers, rationalising their choices. From a pastoral perspective, we need to be aware of these differences and respond accordingly (firmly and lovingly). This has led me to reflect further on those qualities that should be valued when we, as Christians, engage with gay and non-gay folk alike on gay related issues.

When I consider the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ, I see him riding in majesty on a horse as the mighty all-conquering king. But he is a king that espouses

the cause of truth, meekness and righteousness. These three qualities are essential as we tackle the issues. Truth is key because what we say has to be down to what is true and, unlike many who do not wish to pay the price for offending those who accept untruths, we should be forthright in stating and living in accordance with that truth. We need to do so with meekness, recognizing as unprofitable servants, no better than the rest of humankind, and we are only saved by God's grace.

We must avoid being haughty, condescending and patronizing but rather be humble, patient, gentle and respectful. We do as we do because we care about believing, saying, doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong. Other virtues also come to mind, *e.g.* wisdom (knowing what to do and say, when) and love (sacrificial, giving oneself, serving unconditionally the poorest and worst in our community), and we need God's grace to help us. All this needs to be underpinned by a life of faith in and obedience to God. One of the hurtful situations we might have to face is, if we say gay sex is wrong, we may receive a hateful backlash.

I love the way the Bible describes how Jesus mingled with a complete cross section of society about him. He dealt positively with all, living as a servant although he was a king, and incurred the hatred of some. We might also experience that hatred. I deal daily with all sorts of people. Some are gay; most are straight. Sexuality is hardly ever an issue. Should the subject arise, I try to respond sensitively, using the criteria described above, admitting when I do not have the answers. Regarding churches, these should be a welcoming place for all, where people can find healing, friendship and acceptance and, hopefully, a relationship with God; and one's sexuality should not be a barrier. Churches have sometimes dealt wrongly, without love, with gay folk, and this needs repenting of. Individual church fellowships should not duck the difficult issues and deal with these in an appropriate way as they arise, including exercising godly discipline, providing it is done consistently; not going for easy targets but always lovingly, espousing God's high standards.

We should relate to the world as God's servants and not be surprised when God's laws are broken by those who don't feel compelled to comply, and when we see an increasing antipathy toward doing God's will and hostility when challenged. I am often reminded of the advice that we shouldn't take offence if a blind man bumps into us when making my views known in the public square I experience adverse reaction. While we must remain steadfast in our walk of faith, as God's servants we have to deal with any situation we find ourselves in and seek to serve the people about us, not afraid to come to terms with issues that matter, however difficult. We should also respond when called upon to serve those in same-sex relationships and deal with those who see things differently, without embarrassment.

Considering the story of Sodom

The destruction, as a result of God's judgement, of Sodom and Gomorrah, is one of the Bible passages people often refer to when arguing (for and against) the notion that God regards sodomy (sexual activity between two men) as a sin. The practice of sodomy by sodomites (actual word used - which, interestingly, Strong's dictionary translates as a quasi-sacred male prostitute) is referred to (always negatively) five times in the Bible, all outside the main story in Genesis 18 and 19 (Deuteronomy 23v17, 1 Kings 14v24, 15v12, 22v46, 2 Kings 23v7). While the attempt by some of Sodom's residents to rape Lot's guests would have been a heinous crime if they had succeeded, it is not clear whether sodomy was the main issue that God had in mind when he told Abraham he was going to destroy the city because of its wickedness. Possibly not, for elsewhere (Ezekiel 16v49) we learn the sin of Sodom was pride, gluttony, idleness and a neglect of the poor and needy. To merely say it was inhospitality seems rather weak although it should be noted that Lot offered his daughters to satisfy the would-be rapists' lusts and in order to maintain the strict hospitality norms that was part of Middle Eastern culture at the time. It should be further noted that Jude 1v7 suggests that homosexuality may still have been a factor in God's decision. These verses demonstrate that all the "gay texts" should be considered contextually and carefully when seeking to understand whether homosexual relationships are acceptable or not from a Bible perspective.

Questions for discussion

The following are tough questions for you to think about. These are mostly aimed at mature, thoughtful Christians, who are prepared to lay aside prejudice and preconceptions, but hopefully others will find these to be of interest. There are no completely right answers that address all aspects and, if there are, I have yet to find them. We need to have a teachable spirit and what is being asked is done in order to benefit those who truly want to come to terms with the gay conundrum:

1. What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality? (*While not a definitive list, the following texts are frequently referred to in discussion: Genesis 2v24, Genesis 19v4-7, Leviticus 18v22 & 20v13, Matthew 19v3-12, Romans 1v26-27, 1 Corinthians 6v9-11, 1 Timothy 1v9-10, Jude 1v7.*)
2. Are same-sex relationships sinful (see section below)?
3. What is homophobia? Are you homophobic? Is it wrong to be homophobic?
4. There are clear divisions in the church over the issue of homosexuality. How do you view these and how might they be resolved?

5. The law requires us not to discriminate against people on the basis of their sexual orientation. How can you do so yet be true to your Christian beliefs?
6. Is there a conflict between gay and other human, especially religious, rights? If so, how can this be resolved in a way that is fair to all?
7. Could there come a time when Christians might need to contemplate breaking the law in order to satisfy their consciences?
8. What evidence is there that gay sex and sexuality is detrimental to health and well being and, if so, how relevant is this?
9. How would you respond to someone coming to your church that is in a gay relationship or has issues with his or her sexuality?
10. How would you respond if a friend or family member were to declare that he or she is gay?
11. How would you respond to the idea that people can change their sexual orientation through “reparative therapy” and is this something you would want to be, and could see being, implemented?
12. There has recently been a substantial move (now almost completed) within today’s society to legalize same sex marriage (some would say as a consequence of it redefining marriage). How should you / the church respond to marriage becoming available to same sex couples?
13. What is your position regarding gay couples who want to adopt or foster children and is society right to encourage it?
14. What, if anything, should be taught in schools regarding homosexuality and how should schools respond in combating homophobic related bullying?

First time round reflections

We are living in the midst of a culture war. The debate over the rights and wrongs of gay sexuality forms a small yet significant part of that war, and is often used to attack Christians. The stakes are high because the outcome of that war will affect us all, for good or ill. While Christianity is far from being dead and buried, especially in non-western countries, the spirit of atheistic secularism continues to gain influence, often at the expense of the Judaeo-Christian consensus that once held sway. Yet there are unprecedented opportunities for Christians to serve the wider community. On the back of this paradigm shift, the gay agenda has been promoted, often aggressively, and has been accepted to the extent things that were once not thought possible or acceptable are now taking place and widely tolerated.

This may put pressure on Christians to conform or be ostracized. Some Christians will bow to the inevitable, often blown along by the wind of change; some may ignore what is happening – out of apathy or ignorance, or a misguided theology that means they take a view not to be involved in the world beyond what is strictly necessary, but rather to concentrate on the world to come. While we should lament changes that are likely to lead us (our nation) further from God and his laws and lead to further decay, some changes are for the good and could even help purify the Church. To ignore a person's human rights because he or she happens to be gay is unchristian. Also, some inconsistencies and prejudices found among Christians, Liberal, Catholic and evangelical, have been exposed. We need to repent of any wanton ignorance of the needs of and lack of love toward gay people.

The question of how Christians respond to what is happening around us is all important, including those who see nothing wrong with same-sex unions. While some gay folk may want to live a heterosexual lifestyle, others will not. Whichever way these groups are dealt with will have repercussions and the matter can't be ignored. Arguably, gay issues are one of many things Christians need to consider as we seek to serve God. Our priority should be to make disciples of Jesus and to live a life of faith and obedience, loving God and our neighbour. Our lives should be lived both *inside the curtain* (in communion with God) and *outside the camp* (serving others in the wider world). Inevitably, issues around sexuality will arise and we should know how best we can respond. Some answers are not easy to discern, for such is the nature of living in the world with all its contradictions.

Our response needs to be proportional. It is, after all, easy for Christians to censure gay folk because they are soft targets, or use intemperate language, or inappropriate comparisons to make a case (although it happens the other way round too). There are many other sins, and some are conveniently ignored, yet, as far as a holy God is concerned, all sin needs to be repented of. Being constrained by the love of God, our great desire needs to be for truth and righteousness to prevail. We also need to make an impact on society and its members in such a way that it and they are uplifted and can enjoy the blessings that God wants to bestow. May we faithfully play our part in making this happen and at the same time give God all the glory.

The “Leper’s” conference

On 27 January 2012, I attended a conference entitled *The Pastoral and the Prophetic in Conflict? Homosexuality and the Church*, sponsored by CORE (www.core-issues.org) and Anglican Mainstream (www.anglican-mainstream.net). I went with some reticence but also with an expectation that I would learn

something useful. I was not disappointed although I was sorry more did not attend and that Pink News readers (perhaps not surprisingly) viewed it in a negative light, and so did some gay Christians, at a time when bridges need to be built. On certain websites and blogs it was referred to disparagingly as the “Lepers” conference as that was how the keynote speaker referred to gay folks (actually more a swipe at the church for their often unwelcoming response). I learnt more about subjects like the legal context, research findings and what is being taught these days in schools, not just about homosexuality but sexual ethics in general, although a substantial amount of what was said confirmed what I knew or suspected already.

I felt there was a desire to understand and love gay folk, realising the church has often failed to do this, with ourselves being available to people struggling with sin of any sort and broken before God. It was said we needed to balance the need to disciple with having meaningful relationships with those same people and where all are able to share freely. We need to recognize we are all sinners and there is more sin around in the church that is overlooked or not spoken about, *e.g.* addiction to internet pornography, than anything to do with homosexuality. I went away thinking about the text (mentioned toward the start): “*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth*” (John 1v14).

Are same sex relationships sinful?

One of the interesting consequences of going *outside the camp* is you often get to connect with some interesting people and new possibilities open up. One of the spin offs from attending the “Lepers” conference was getting to correspond with Christians who are gay or accept gay relationships, including those who regard themselves as Evangelical. I was eventually led to a website of one gay affirming organization, *Accepting Evangelicals*, where I read some powerful, moving personal stories, including that of Benny Hazlehurst, who describes himself (on his blog) as a rebellious vicar. Benny kindly commented on an earlier version of this paper, including making the observation that it was evident that I regard same sex relationships as sinful, whereas there are Christians, including those of Evangelical persuasion that don’t, and this has obvious repercussions in my writing. I accept this and also there are various websites that offer alternative Christian perspectives on the subject of gay relationships, which I would encourage readers to visit.

Part of my own journey has been to look at the various angles and issues around homosexuality, including this question, which I agree can’t be avoided and, depending on how you answer it, will have consequences one way or another,

including being alienated from one or another group. When considering the gay conundrum, I had not intended to make a defence for traditional Christian views *per se*, and indeed have challenged a number of these, but rather to consider the wider issues, especially from the perspective of those who hold views like mine yet wish to engage in the wider community, and those I work with who don't.

My fundamental position, at the start of writing my paper, remains: that marriage, as defined in Genesis 2v24 and reaffirmed in Matthew 19v3-12, is the one relationship ordained by God for two people to come together as one and be sexually intimate, and those two people have to be of the opposite sex and provides the principle context for procreation and bringing up children. I have wavered in deciding whether or not to regard faithful, same sex relationships as sinful, and was inclined to compare the situation with polygamy - while not what God intended, we learn from the Bible he blessed and affirmed polygamists, like King David. I have also looked at the few texts traditionally cited to backup the idea that homosexual relationships are sinful (*Genesis 19v4-8, Leviticus 18v22 & 20v13, Romans 1v26-27, 1 Corinthians 6v9-11, 1 Timothy 1v9-10, Jude 1v7*) and while not endorsing interpretations that these do not condemn homosexuality, I concede that these are not as clear cut as I had once thought and as some Christians claim.

But I must reiterate my understanding of the teaching of the Bible: sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman IS sinful. If we are to be followers of Christ we should resolve not sin and if and when we do we must repent of it. There are many sins which any one of us can and do succumb to and, in the light of God's holiness, there is no hierarchy of sinfulness – but for the grace of God, any sin could consign us to eternal damnation and must therefore be repented of. Having a same sex sexual orientation is NOT sinful providing it does not lead to lust or sexual activity (the same, incidentally, can be said about opposite sex attraction). I recognize there will be sharply differing views, and some will have experienced significant hurt and anguish, including among my readership. The issue we are faced with, and I one I feel I am barely qualified to fully address, is regarding the pastoral and other needs of gay folk, Christian and otherwise, for these do need to be addressed and, sadly, the church has too often failed to do so.

Equal marriage and gay marriage?

I well remember a short exchange I had with the equality officer at our local council about how best to bring together the Council and local churches in order to best serve the local community. During our discussion, I asked him if the Council would be prepared to work with bigots, to which, after a surprised pause, the answer was an unequivocal no. I then pointed out that in a recent speech the deputy

Prime Minister had accused those who oppose marriage equality of bigotry yet there were those in the room, and who the Council were looking to partner with, who held that position. I think my Council colleague got the point and, unlike in some other places, our Council does work with those hold traditional view on homosexuality. Ironically, in a day when there are increasing opportunities and overtures for the churches to minister to the needy as they are often well placed to do so, Christians who hold mainstream orthodox views are being marginalised.

Depending on where one stands on an issue that was hotly argued in the consultation (now closed) initiated by the UK government and still is, the issue is either one of ensuring equal rights when it comes to who should be allowed to marry or redefining marriage in order to allow for same sex unions. On one hand we have the Coalition for Equal Marriage (C4EM) with its strap line “don’t let bigotry stop people in love getting married” arguing the former position and the Coalition for Marriage (C4M) with its strap line “don’t play politics one man + one woman with marriage”. Both launched petitions, inviting those who support their respective positions to sign, and many have. The outcome of the debate and whether the government proposition will become law is uncertain as I write, although despite opposition, the government are pressing forward with their plans.

My own views have been articulated earlier. The seeming polarisation of positions is probably unsurprising given the opinions that are represented. However, certain aspects of the debate are regrettable and, despite my views on the question, my criticism is directed at both sides. There is a tendency to want to make points but not understand why the opposition argue as they do. Much of the vilification is damaging and unnecessary. Gay folk or those who believe in gay marriage should not be demonised and looked upon with disdain by those who see things differently. Neither should those who maintain the traditional position be labelled as a homophobic hate mongers and marginalised by those who disagree.

I regret that those on both sides of the argument too often do not engage in respectful, intelligent debate and do not deal entirely with facts. I am disturbed when I note Pink News readers accusing C4M leaders of falsifying facts, acting in inappropriate ways and not being prepared to back these up when challenged. Having said that, some of its readers’ comments ridicule and revile Christians expressing their convictions and also conveniently twist the truth, and this is also unhelpful. For the C4EM supporter, it is often mainly a matter of pressing for societal equality and addressing perhaps the final hurdle to be overcome in order to achieve full LGBT rights. I feel for my lesbian friend who will not enter into a civil partnership with her partner because she sees this as second best and is anguished that she cannot marry the person she loves: feeling that who should marry who

should be a matter for the civil rather than religious authorities, and vehemently points out that in countries that have adopted same sex marriage there has been no detrimental affect on those societies or to religious freedom and that traditional marriage is already compromised because divorced couples can marry. Equally, I sympathise with the C4M supporter that maintains the traditional position out of conscience and deeply held religious convictions, and despite opposition. Some gay folk and those who do not hold religious beliefs also favour traditional marriage and see the detrimental effects should these changes be made.

The reason why I agree with the C4M position has already been given. When I got married, we deliberately chose to use some of the liturgy contained in the Book of Common Prayer (1662). It gives three reasons why traditional marriage is a good thing – *“First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name. Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication. Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”* While I recognise that those who do not hold such views might feel affronted should these be imposed on them and that same sex marriage can to some extent encapsulate these things, I do see this as being the foremost institution, laid down since the beginning of creation, for the good of human kind, and tinkering with this, through divorce, infidelity or, in this instance, redefining marriage, will be detrimental to the wellbeing of society as a whole. I also see a further significance – the joining of opposites, which can complement each other as they come together as one, can be seen at the beginning of time and at the end of time. It reflects the relationship God has with his human creation and specifically between God and Israel and Christ and the Church.

To summarise my position, I recognise the attraction of the argument to legitimise same sex marriage, based on notions of equal rights, that two people who truly love each other should be able to do so and this should be a matter for civil rather than religious authorities. However, I oppose same sex marriage because:

1. Since earliest recorded history, marriage has generally been understood as a union between a man and a woman, and it seems rather presumptuous and arrogant to change that understanding now.
2. Even if we were to make the distinction between civil and religious marriage, it is unlikely society would come to terms with such a distinction.
3. Marriage as traditionally defined is for the good of society, especially family life and the procreating and nurturing of children. Widening the membership of this institution by bringing in notions of equal rights will undermine it.

4. The reasonable rights of same sex couples are already safeguarded through civil partnerships (and if need be, this could be strengthened).
5. Given that “*righteousness exalteth a nation*”, I have to oppose anything that is not righteous on that basis.
6. Understanding the mystical link to how God / Christ relates to Israel / Church is best maintained when we endorse traditional marriage.
7. By changing the criteria for marriage to one based on equal rights for those who want it will, as has already happened, mean there is no logical reason to oppose polygamy, incest, paedophilia and bestiality as a basis for marriage.
8. We have already seen those attacked who hold traditional views on sexuality. This is likely to increase when same sex marriage is made law.
9. Some teachers will be put under an inordinate pressure to endorse or emphasise ideas to children that run contrary to what they believe to be right.
10. Government has no mandate to make these changes (despite claims to the contrary, more have registered opposition to government plans than for).
11. The hidden costs of making changes to the law etc. would be enormous and, at a time of acute austerity, would seem to be a pernicious distraction.
12. Despite assurances to the contrary, churches will likely be pressurised or made to conduct same sex marriages or face the consequences if they resist.

When the second reading of the Bill to legalise same sex marriage passed in the House of Commons (by a 400 to 175 vote majority), more Conservatives voted against than for. Both sides offer different interpretations of the result and expectations of what might happen next, but as the Bill has now become law we will all need to adjust to a new paradigm.

And so it continues - further thoughts

In trying to relate the gay conundrum with life both as a community activist and as one who holds conservative evangelical Christian views, including that of one man, one woman marriage being the only right relationship (in God’s eyes at least) for sexual intimacy, as society’s main building block and the principle one for the bringing up of children, I have been mindful of many significant developments since I began thinking about the subject. The tide seems to be turning in terms of more ordinary people now seeing same sex relationships in a favourable light (and to the extent that those who don’t are too often condemned), and having been sold the enticing idea of equal rights for all, although that move is far from complete. We are still some way from hearing the last word on the subject and there will no

doubt still be twists and turns as to how the issues raised here will get resolved in the cultural context I and my readers do find and will find themselves. Of course, tides ebb and flow, but as one who prays the Lord's prayer – "thy kingdom come" the desire has to be for kingdom values, which I would equate to the will of God, to prevail, not just in the church but in society as a whole.

The biggest development since beginning to write this paper has been the passing of the Same Sex Marriage Bill (which up to then was an optimistic rather than realistic hope of gay lobbyists), and the speed in which this has been accomplished. While there was significant opposition to the Parliamentary passage of this bill, it was not enough to prevent it, and in particular concerns to do with conscience have failed to have been addressed. We still have preachers arrested for speaking against homosexuality, churches being threatened with legal action for not marrying same sex couples and teachers being disciplined for not teaching the new definition of marriage in an approving manner, thus highlighting those concerns. But we are where we are. When I congratulated a same sex activist friend on a result he had been working hard and with sincerity to achieve, I also was being sincere, notwithstanding my own disappointment. While, as one gay friend assured me, society will not disintegrate when the law is enacted, there will be repercussions, as there always is when God's law is flouted, yet we must act with grace and wisdom.

While I have tried hard to be fair toward gay folk who feel strongly on gay rights issues, I realise I may not have been able to win too many over, who might have otherwise seen me and those who think like me as a friend and potential ally when it comes to advocating for social justice. To then be called a homophobic bigot and belittled as a religious nutter can be hurtful but it goes with the territory and is one of the costs of Christian discipleship. To be vilified and disfellowshipped by fellow believers for going soft on gay folk, when my aim was merely to challenge their own prejudices and inconsistencies and help create a climate of understanding and respect, is even more hurtful, but that is a price worth paying in seeking to get the right balance. Given I am already prepared to live with the consequences of believing homosexual activity to be sinful, it seems rather pernicious to contribute to further division by feeding prejudice and lies and ignoring the aspirations, concerns and contributions of gay folk and, moreover, create unnecessary difficulties for community activists, who take a position like mine, to operate in the public square. How to engage and also put across one's point will always be a challenge. Recently, I was part of a Street Pastor team who helped a victim of a homophobic motivated assault outside a gay bar. Earning the trust of the victim and those at the bar seemed a step in the right direction. When a friend of mine recently invited me to join a demonstration against the passing of the equal marriage bill, I declined because I felt uneasy to do so, because it seemed to me as negative and

may be misconstrued. To her credit, she and her husband were able to strike a good rapport with a passing gay couple through winsome engagement and supported a nearby protest against government sanctioned attacks on gay folk in Africa.

My journey has been an eventful one and my views have been challenged and modified throughout. The disgust and antipathy toward practising homosexuals that my early religious upbringing helped to instil has gone but always there is a danger for the pendulum to swing too far the other way when it may appear that I condone what God condemns. If that has happened, and it has, then I regret it, but trying to find the balance on a subject many Christians fudge and fail to think through sufficiently and, closer to home, when Bible believing ones hold unbalanced and therefore unbiblical positions, I have no such regrets. When I recently read through a helpful book on the subject: "God, Gays and the Church", edited by Lisa Nolland, Chris Sugden and Sarah Finch, I realised I still have more thinking to do on the subject and that applies as much, probably more, to most other Christians. Any reading should include the Bible, including the "gay texts" referred to earlier and included for the readers convenience at the end of this paper (I suggest more than one version of the Bible be referred to and there is access to Hebrew and Greek lexicons and good concordances). Many traditionalists feel these are quite clear in its condemnation of homosexual behaviour but there are also earnest Christians who offer differing perspectives e.g. www.acceptingevangelicals.org/resources/, and both should be considered when seeking to come to a view. However, having done all this, I have to conclude that the Bible is against homosexual practice and I need to act accordingly, including showing love and compassion. I wonder if the acrimonious impasse seen in our culture when considering "gay issues" could have been partly averted if Christians had practically and compassionately responded to helping gay folk affected by the AIDS epidemic, when this arose in the 1980's instead of making sanctimonious comments like this being the consequence of sin?

If I were to return to this paper in a year's time, or come to that a lot less, there will be more that I would or could write and would like to write. I feel though, whatever happens from now on, the issues and concerns raised here will remain although the areas where these may be applied will change. But I would like to refer to a matter that has once again come to the fore in recent weeks. Pink News titled it: "*Core Issues Trust seeks immediate injunction to remove London pro-gay bus adverts*". When the London mayor, Boris Johnson, allowed the gay lobbying group, Stonewall, advert: "*Some people are gay. Get over it*" and disallowed the Core Issues advert: "*Not Gay. Ex-Gay, Post-Gay and Proud. Get over it*", it was on the basis that the former would help combat homophobia and the latter would add to it. This situation remains even though Core Issues Trust contests what is happening through the courts. The article ends by quoting Ben Summerskill, chief executive

of Stonewall: *“It does seem a tragedy that these people who make so much noise about being Christian don’t spend a little more of their money on tackling polio or Third World poverty but a lot of money on slightly frivolous legal actions.”*

While I suspect Mr Summerskill may have been somewhat disingenuous as he would likely have taken a similar action if the positions were reversed and will know that many Christians who go down this route are also often at the forefront of dealing with poverty, he does raise an interesting point that is at the heart of this book. Christian Concern, who have been involved in fighting this and similar cases, made the point: *“Christians in the UK today have a choice: to roll over and allow the State and the Court to pass between each other their responsibilities to ensure freedom of speech, each failing spectacularly, or, as we believe, to **remain a Prophetic voice**, using all legal means to enable Christians to stand up for Truth.”* I cannot say how much I would have fought to allow the Core advert through the courts, but we are in a culture war and if we don’t fight we will suffer loss and so will society. This was highlighted when one of Core’s directors, Dr. Mike Davidson, had his accreditation as a psychotherapist removed because of his view and practice that homosexual inclination can be reversed, if a person desired, through reparative therapy, and is another example of Christians suffering unjustly for practising their biblically based views on how God wants us to be.

Another Pink News story that has broken as I write has the headline: *“Bishop blasts Archbishop of Canterbury for being sympathetic to homosexuals”* and continues: *“An Anglican bishop in Nigeria has launched a furious attack at Justin Welby for being “sympathetic to homosexuals” and says the Archbishop of Canterbury’s position on gay rights is “pathetic”.* This will come as no surprise to those who have been following developments in the Anglican communion on its responses to the issue of homosexuality and the deep divisions on the matter that have become apparent in recent years. While one can sympathise with Archbishop Welby for wanting to deal sympathetically with the issues and wanting to build bridges with the gay community, evidenced by the well publicised meeting he had with the gay rights activist, Peter Tatchell, and an understandable desire to create peace among Anglicans on this matter, one cannot ignore the concerns of the Nigerian bishops that biblical truth must not be compromised, and conclude that further schism is nigh inevitable. The most up to date example (as I write) of the Anglican church trying to accommodate the concerns and perspectives of LBGT groups relates to an announcement that it intends to invite Stonewall into its schools to deliver anti-bullying education. This might seem a laudable gesture to tackle a real issue, and even makes sense given Stonewall’s expertise and resources in this area. However, the concerns of Christian groups, like Christian Concern, is that this tantamount to

inviting in the foxes in to look after the hen houses, given Stonewall's belief that people are born gay, being gay is ok, those that disagree are bigots (evidenced by it bestowing bigot of the year awards on some Anglican clergy who merely express traditional church teaching on these matters), and the "gay element" in bullying may be given far more significance than it really deserves (there being many other factors), and inviting them could have a net harmful affect on vulnerable minors.

While I am not an Anglican, I am not a dispassionate onlooker either and I have written what I have partly as my contribution to debating these important matters. Some years ago I undertook extensive research into the history of the denomination I have had most involvement with - the Plymouth Brethren. As has been the case throughout the history of the church, division did take place (an early example was on how they should receive those who claim to be Christians yet embraced doctrinal error or associated with those who did, in the mid nineteenth century), leading to both Open and Exclusive brands of Brethrenism and not a little hurt, suspicion and antagonism. During my research I was struck by a comment made by the eminent Brethren theologian, F.F. Bruce, who observed that in the movement there were two important guiding principles regarding unity: the need to separate from evil and the common life that true believers in Christ could and should share and enjoy. To some extent, the division that took place was as a consequence of not maintaining the balance regarding these principles with the two factions favouring one principle over the other. The tensions being experienced among Anglicans are not so dissimilar. My own brand of community activism recognises the importance of holding sound doctrine and finding common ground. It is why I have devoted time and effort writing about the "gay conundrum", wanting to see some sort of peace, if only to tackle the issues of alleviating poverty and tackling social justice.

I have recently been given the following quote by a friend in connection with one of my activist passions: helping the homeless - "*When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.*" (Dom Helder Camara). A story that recently broke locally is of a town centre church looking to turn away rough sleepers from sleeping in its porch due to problems this caused. I told my friend that my nemesis (because of his opposition to things I felt needed to be said to my peers) as a young, zealous, keen, fundamentalist Christian at university was its personable, energetic, liberal, gay chaplain, Malcolm Johnson. I learnt later he was a prime mover in setting up the Lesbian and Gay Christian movement and played a key role in moving forward the gay agenda in the Anglican church and wider afield. Unsurprisingly, with some Anglican clergy I had rather looked up to there was acrimonious tension, although yet again I wonder if either side fully listened to the other and at least acknowledged the things they had in

common! But relevant to the quote and the church attitude to homelessness, Malcolm, as Rector of St. Botolph, Aldgate, London, played a key role in developing programs that helped the homeless and later became involved practically helping those affected by AIDS/HIV. Just maybe, Malcolm is a saint!

I would like to end this section with a quote from a previous Pope. The attitude to homosexuality and gay folk of the Catholic church and changes to those attitudes, which seem to me, and as seen with the comments and actions of the current Pope (Francis), as becoming more conciliatory, while still maintaining traditional church teaching on the subject, is an interesting one, albeit outside the scope of this paper. The issues touch personally if we are to believe there are a number (no-one knows how many but thought to be significant) of gay priests. When the leader of the Scottish Catholics, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, was named as Stonewall's "Bigot of the Year" for his outspoken condemnation of homosexuality, one felt he had touched a raw nerve and maybe he was saying what needed to be said. However, he later became living proof of the psychological phenomenon, cognitive dissonance, when it was found that he had himself engaged in homosexual activity. But truth is truth even if those who state it are poor exponents and a culture war for the hearts and minds of human kind is all too real and raging, having enormous ramifications. But back to the quote: *"It is legitimate and necessary to ask oneself if this [gay marriage] is not perhaps part of a new ideology of evil, perhaps more insidious and hidden, which attempts to pit human rights against the family and against man."* – Pope John Paul II. I support human rights but I also welcome this insight.

While the above quote might have been a fitting finale to this paper, there has since been, even as I am about to publish this paper, and just as I had anticipated, ongoing developments in the way homosexual activity is seen, how people respond to the changes that are happening and how those who dissent are treated. A private members bill is currently being put forward in the UK Parliament to ban gay conversion therapy. It seems to me that the role of a Christian includes converting folk from living a life not in accordance with the will of God to one that is, and if we accept, as most do, providing there are proper safeguards, counselling and therapy these can be helpful activities in getting people who want to change their behaviour to do so, then this should be cause for concern. Whether we agree with gay conversion therapy or not, to disallow it is a further erosion of religious freedom and the move to ban it represents the disturbing trend of curtailing freedom of speech and thought. As my paper has already sought to demonstrate, this is but one of many moves, not just away from the Judaeo-Christian consensus that once existed, but toward further marginalising those who still subscribe to traditional beliefs, not just by acquiescence but as an integral part of what they do.

These are by no means one off instances for, at the time this story broke, there was news of yet another street preacher being arrested (it seems on a charge of breach of the peace and propagating homophobic hate) because someone took offence at his preaching, part of which included mentioning homosexuality but in the context of the need to repent from all sin; a school chaplain was dismissed for expressing concern over the prospect of teaching same sex marriage in an approving manner; and one of the contestants in the reality TV show “Celebrity Big Brother” was told off for sharing his views on the subject with a housemate. The message of my book “Outside the Camp”, of which this paper is part, is that Christians should get their hands dirty by getting involved in their communities and addressing the needs of the hour, and can do so without sacrificing their principles. They can and should do so in conjunction with those who disagree with them, while realistic about the limits of what can be done. My hope also is those who do not hold traditional Christian perspectives will respect those who do (and vice-versa) and those from either camp will seek ways to work together to address the needs of our society rather than polarise positions such that the very group that has some of the answers, has demonstrated care and compassion and has made a difference is then excluded.

As this paper goes to print, there has arisen a furore over an article by Steve Chalke, a respected evangelical leader who, pertinent to my work as a community activist, does many of the things I have advocated in my writings, including often leading the way. He argues that Christian inclusion should unconditionally include those in committed gay relationships. Understandably, some fellow evangelicals have condemned his position as unbiblical and going beyond what God has allowed. I suspect what is seen here may be a taste of what might be expected in the future, especially as society increasingly comes to view homosexual activity as being acceptable. Archbishop Welby has touched on a contentious point as to what role the church might have in blessing gay relationships, and be seen as relevant and charitable without being schismatic and apostate. Having said what I wanted to say on the subject, I don’t propose to dissect the arguments of the Archbishop, Steve or his detractors have advanced, other than point to what I have already written. I do not claim the final word on the matter but do recognise the conundrum about Christians who are gay and wanting to include all who love Christ, while still adhering to sound doctrine and, as for non-Christians who are gay, wanting to reach out to them in every way possible, while not commending what God condemns.

A tribute to a friend

During the course of writing on the subject of homosexuality, among the many who I did consult with was Stuart Ross (Stu), who I met (though not physically) via the

Readers Comments section of Pink News. We had many a robust exchange on these issues, and while we often found we held common views, we were also often ideologically opposed. As a gay man, passionate about issues of social justice, Stu felt he needed to make his views more widely known and work toward resolutions that would further this end. What endeared me to Stu was that despite our differences he was always courteous and would carefully put forward views based on fact and reason and (importantly for me) engage in respectful debate with those he differed with. I learned recently, with sadness, that Stu had unexpectedly died (aged 38) and I would like to pay tribute to his contribution in my life and thinking. I should also thank Pink News for inviting me to write a tribute in their online newsletter and acknowledge the generous comments of its readers regarding Stu.

The “gay texts”

Genesis 2v24

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

Genesis 19v4-7

“... the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter: And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them. And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him, And said, I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly.”

Leviticus 18v22 & 20v13

“Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination... If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”

Matthew 19v3-12

“... Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the

beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery. His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake..."

Romans 1v26-27

"For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet."

1 Corinthians 6v9-11

"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God."

1 Timothy 1v9-10

"Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine;"

Jude 1v7

"Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."