

**In Defence of Fig Leaves:
A Contribution to the Sexuality Debate in the UCA**

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I am grateful for the opportunity to present this paper to interested people within the Uniting Church in Australia. It is a slightly abbreviated version of a contribution that I have offered to a projected Festschrift volume in honour of my friend and teacher Harry Wardlaw. While academic in background and general method, my purpose is to contribute to the theological reflection of our church in this contentious matter. I offer these thoughts as a tangential reflection on the long-running debate about Christian teaching on homosexuality. This debate continues to be of central importance in the life of the Christian churches. It profoundly touches our sense of human and personal identity. It raises awkward and uncomfortable questions about biblical teaching and about past Christian understandings and practices. It raises questions about God's purposes for us and our world. Ultimately, it raises questions about our understanding of God.

This debate has challenged me at many different levels over many years¹ and is showing no signs of getting any easier, despite my best efforts at reaching well-based theological conclusions. I recognize that I have the possibility of entering this debate at a detached and intellectual level because I am a happily married father of two and grandfather of one. Also, I have heeded the prudential counsel of the church in which I grew up about avoiding promiscuous sexual involvements because they compromise personal integrity. My experiential base for thinking about these questions is therefore mostly centred on traditional Christian family life and what I have received from the imaginative and/or biographical accounts of others. Yet it is also true that I can learn from what I receive from those whose experience has been very different from my own.

Perhaps the most important thing for me to acknowledge is that the voice of heterosexual males has been historically privileged in this discussion. There are many dimensions to this historical privilege, but my point is that the mere fact of this privilege makes the speech situation unequal. This was brought home to me recently when I read an account of a session of a workshop on violence. In this session, the group were divided into two,

¹ I can claim to have been present at the beginnings of this debate in the Uniting Church, at least in terms of questions about the ordination of openly gay people. I was minister in the Uniting Church of Fitzroy when one such candidate presented herself for ordination in 1981. I was also a member of a working group on this issue for the Yarra Valley Presbytery in the period 1981-84.

the men and the women. All participants were then provided with paper and pens and invited to make a list of the things that they did every day in order to avoid sexual harassment and assault. The group of men reportedly all scratched their heads and looked blank. The only positive response recorded was to stay out of jail. They were all finished within five minutes. The group of women wrote pages of detailed accounts of habitual actions and strategies which they found it necessary to use.

This anecdotal report brought home to me the profoundly different experience of men and women in this matter. My point here is that something of the same kind of difference – a difference that affects all aspects of our lives – exists between heterosexual and homosexual men, and probably also between heterosexual and homosexual women. Admittedly, there will be many other people who find themselves somewhere between these clear-cut identities, like men who happen to be unusually fearful of predatory sexual attack or people of bisexual orientation. Still, the general point is that this is a situation of inequality of standing. Apart from anything else, it is very difficult to find genuinely common ground. It also seems important for the privileged to show care for those less privileged.

Elizabeth Stuart, a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Glamorgan, is a theologian who writes from a feminist and lesbian perspective. Her sardonic comments on the efforts of male theologians such as myself in this debate are worth hearing.

Those of us who are lesbian, gay or bisexual have sat on the sidelines watching scholars tackling each other for the ball of our lives. When the fundamentalist gets hold of it he kicks it into the goal marked ‘perversion deliberately chosen, explicitly condemned by God’s word, get cured or get out of the Church’. When the conservative gets hold of it he kicks it into the goal marked ‘not deliberately chosen, probably born that way, but activity still condemned by God’s word – it is OK to be it, not OK to engage in genital acts’. The angst-ridden liberal kicks the ball back and forwards, up and down the pitch; finally he stands in the middle and declares that, whereas scripture and tradition undoubtedly condemn homosexual acts, they did not know as much about homosexuality as we do today; so although the Church has a duty to uphold the idea of heterosexual marriage, because that is what scripture and tradition do, homosexual relationships might be looked upon as falling short of this ideal but not sinful as such because they can’t help it. He then scuttles off the pitch before the crowd and the players can get him. The radical bounces the ball up and down on his head, doing amazing tricks whilst he explains: ‘Yes, marriage is the ideal, but lesbian and gay people are perfectly capable of marriage’. He awaits the adoration of the crowd but the only sounds are of splatters of rage coming out of the fundamentalist and the conservative, and the anxious perspiring of the liberal in the changing-room. . . . He turns to the crowd: ‘What *do* you want, then?’ he

shouts in exasperation. And with one voice the answer booms: ‘Can we have our ball back please?’ We are tired of other Christian people kicking around the ball of our lives. . . . Lesbian and gay people are the latest in a now fairly long line of people claiming the right to do theology for themselves about themselves.²

There is a fundamental question of principle asserted here, that it is improper for one group of people to theologize in such a way that they unilaterally define the reality of the lives of other people. This seems an acceptable principle to me, both in terms of natural justice and in terms of the nature of theology. Our human theologies seek to express God’s truth. Where we are dealing with the reality of people’s lives (and ultimately, I believe that this also holds for the reality of our own lives), we should, as a fundamental matter of truth, recognize that God is the judge and not ourselves. We should therefore respect the right of others to inform us of how they believe they are before God. We should also attend to anything that they might want to tell us about how we seem to them to be before God. This does not end all questions, but it offers a better chance of success in the theological task than individual theologians universalizing their intuitions. This respect for others requires us to engage with others in the task of articulating our understanding of God.

In terms of Stuart’s typology of male theologians, I recognize all too much of myself in the liberal. Perhaps this is my moment for re-emerging from the changing-room. I see value in emphasizing the need for humility in this whole matter. The theological condemnation of sodomy, generally understood today to refer to same-sex genital activity, has a very long history in Judaeo-Christian tradition, though the word itself is apparently not found before the eleventh century in Latin usage.³ It is a word formed for purposes of condemnation. Church people from generations up to and including my own have to ask: ‘Can it really be true that this condemnation is not from God?’ Even to use the word is to conjure up the shades of Christian inquisition of the lives of those suspected of heterodox faith and practice, an inquisition all too often backed by the authority to torture and kill. Liberality in holding back this authority seems to me not such a bad thing.

² Elizabeth Stuart. Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships. (London: Mowbray, 1995), 1-2. The main theme of her book is a reflection on what the experience of gay and lesbian people can contribute to Christian theological reflection on friendship (God’s friendship for us and our friendship with each other).

³ Cf. Mark Jordan. The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1. Jordan shows how the word *sodomia*, sodomy, came into use as a sub-category of the sin of *luxuria*, luxury or the love of pleasure. In mediaeval usage, it had a shifting range of meanings that could sometimes include masturbation and/or sexual intercourse with animals.

The most serious question for Christians here is probably that of God's judgement. One of the important divisions in this debate is between those who believe that we already know what God's judgement is and those who do not so believe. If we do know, it is a matter of unfaith if we shirk our responsibility to witness to this judgement. If we do not, it seems quite wrong to condemn people different from ourselves (who do not obviously harm others) in the name of God. I stand with those who genuinely believe that we do not know how God judges homoerotic friendships. I say this on the basis of a careful study of the relevant passages of the Bible and of church tradition. It also seems important to remember the words of the Sermon on the Mount: 'Judge not, that you be not judged' (Matthew 7:1 NRSV). God is the judge of each of us and our conversation within the church should continue to take this as a starting point.⁴

An important prior question we should ask in thinking about God's judgement is who this 'we' may be. When we intentionally include people of homosexual orientation within the bounds of this 'we', the nature of the question is likely to change. People who are existentially involved in the relationships under consideration deserve respect in two important ways. They have a distinct authority in relation to the lived experience under question which the rest of us – I believe – must acknowledge. They also have the right to a care for their privacy in matters of self-disclosure. We all know about the prevalence of self-serving and self-justifying dynamics when our own case is under scrutiny. As Christians, we have well-developed ways of testing the spirits to see if they be of God. My conclusion is that it is impossible to enter into this debate without a lively sense of our need for divine guidance and assistance in discernment.

Our spiritual forebears knew about homosexuality. They mostly had a simple answer to it, which was a general rejection of homosexual behaviour as a possibility for Christians. To let one voice speak for this majority view, we can turn to what Karl Barth has to say in the Church Dogmatics.

...everything which points in the direction of male or female seclusion, or of religious or secular orders or communities, or of male or female segregation – if it is undertaken in principle and not consciously and temporarily as an emergency measure – is obviously disobedience. All due respect to the comradeship of soldiers! But neither men nor women can seriously wish to be alone, as in clubs and ladies' circles. Who commands or permits them to run

⁴ It has been suggested that the mere fact that this matter has so exercised churches around the world is a sign that God is calling us to rethink it. Elizabeth Stuart quotes the World Council of Churches study (see bibliography) approvingly in this sense (Stuart p.xvii).

away from each other? ... It is well to pay heed even to the first steps in this direction.

These first steps may well be symptoms of the malady called homosexuality. This is the physical, psychological and social sickness, the phenomenon of perversion, decadence and decay, which can emerge when man refuses to admit the validity of the divine command in the sense in which we are now considering it. In Rom. 1 Paul connected it with idolatry, with changing the truth of God into a lie, with the adoration of the creature rather than the Creator (v.25).

... there follows the corrupt emotional and finally physical desire in which – in a sexual union which is not and cannot be genuine – man thinks he must seek and can find in man, and woman in woman, a substitute for the despised partner. ... Naturally the command of God is opposed to these courses. This is almost too obvious to need stating. ... But the decisive word of Christian ethics must consist in a warning against entering on the whole way of life which can only end in the tragedy of concrete homosexuality. ...

The command of God shows him irrefutably – in clear contradiction to his own theories – that as a man he can only be genuinely human with woman, or as a woman with man. In proportion as he accepts this insight, homosexuality can have no place in his life, whether in its more refined or cruder forms.⁵

There is much here that is obviously helpful. The requirement that men relate to women and men (and women to men and women) in order to find their humanity is an appropriate challenge to all areas of same-sex preference. This is particularly helpful to the church in assessing gifts for Christian ministry. It does seem clear that men who despise women and women who hate men are not well placed to convey the Christian gospel. Well roared, old lion. So why might we feel a need to go beyond Barth's categorical rejection of physical homosexuality?

The basic reason why I feel the need to withhold assent from this rejection is the claim advanced by homosexual people who are Christians. These people tell us that they are called by God into Christian obedience and that, for them, part of the expression of that obedience is through a loving friendship with another person of the same sex. On Barth's terms, this is an impossibility if homoerotic behaviour is involved. Yet we are finding significant numbers of people in the life of our churches who are dedicating their lives to proving the viability of this way of life for homosexual people called by Christ. The advice of Gamaliel to the Temple Council in Jerusalem about dealing with the first Christians has resonance here. 'If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it – in that case you may even be found fighting against God' (Acts 5:38-39).

⁵ Karl Barth. Church Dogmatics III:4. Trans. GW Bromiley and TF Torrance. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 165-66.

I recognize that for many Christians, the fact that it is part of our sinful human condition to prefer our own way to God's way means that they find it hard to credit the possibility of Christian vocation for practicing homosexual people. Still, this is for me the fundamental issue for the church. Is there a genuine vocation from God for certain individuals into a form of Christian identity different from those traditionally accepted? Nancy Duff⁶ presents an approach to this question in terms of vocation.

Drawing on the doctrine of vocation and the freedom of God, I contend that while most human beings are called by God into heterosexual relationships and some are called into the celibate life, still others are called into homosexual relationships. This affirmation of faithful, homosexual unions does not challenge the essential value of the male-female relationship (as some fear that it will) any more than the affirmation of celibacy does.⁷

For Christians, living in the light is important. We cannot afford to refuse to know what is true. Whatever the consequent difficulties, Christians must, it seems to me, accept the need for the genuine 'coming out'⁸ of homosexual people. We should do so in the same spirit that we welcome all honest confession of what we have done and who we are. The differences among Christians which are still proving divisive relate not to 'coming out' as such, but to how Christians should respond to it. Conservative evangelicals see 'coming out' as a confession of a certain kind of sinfulness, so that the appropriate response is aimed at the overcoming of what is seen as sinful homosexual activity. Many liberal Christians consider the wrongness of some activities involving homosexuality to depend upon features such as promiscuity or the exploitation of children rather than homosexuality as such. Many liberals are happy to criticize promiscuity and exploitation by anyone, whatever the sexual orientation involved, but not to criticize sexual orientation. Both groups claim theological and biblical support for their view.

Before going into the arguments for these opposing positions, I want to look more closely at the matter of fig leaves. Fig leaves have had a bad press. They are regarded as a pathetic attempt at modesty where covering up has become impossible. They are generally thought to add to the embarrassment of nakedness through their inadequacy as covering and

⁶ Nancy Duff is Associate Professor of Reformed Theological Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey.

⁷ Nancy Duff. "Christian Vocation, Freedom of God and Homosexuality", in Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture. Ed. David Balch. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2000), 261-277.

⁸ 'Coming out' refers to homosexual people making their sexual orientation publicly known. This process of difficult and dangerous self-revelation can obviously apply to many other kinds of people. Cf. P Campolo. 'In God's House There Are Many Closets', in Homosexuality and Christian Faith. Ed. W.Wink. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 97-104.

through the shame displayed by the attempt to cover up. Excuses that are too threadbare to be effective are sometimes referred to metaphorically as fig leaves. I can imagine that you are wondering about my choice of title. What's to defend? How could fig leaves be excused, let alone defended?

Fig leaves play a significant role in the story of creation and fall in the early chapters of the book of Genesis. They relate to the theme of human nakedness and shame. In the world created by God, the humans were naked and were not ashamed (Gen. 2:25). After eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they knew that they were naked and they were ashamed. To overcome their shame, they tried to hide their nakedness by sewing together fig leaves as aprons (Gen. 3:7). They then hid from God. These are the only actions recorded in the wake of their eating of the forbidden fruit, so that this sense of shame would seem to have a primal significance. Perhaps we can say that the sense of shame both expresses and seeks to conceal their new-found sense of vulnerability and separation from God.

The dialogue between God and Adam and Eve in hiding is well known. In it, the close connection between eating the fruit of the tree and knowing that they were naked is again central (cf. Gen. 3:10-11). God pronounces judgement on the serpent, Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:14-19). Just before expelling the humans from the garden, he gives them garments of skin (Gen. 3:21). We may wonder from where the skin came. We should also note that God gives them no other help for life outside the garden. This gift confirms their initial judgement that being naked in a fallen world justifies a need for covering. The garments given by God are real covering of a more permanent value than the aprons of fig leaves that they made for themselves.

What seems to me to emerge from this aspect of the story is that covering for our human nakedness is indeed needed in a fallen world. Nakedness is our true condition before God. In the original state of unbroken unity with God, our nakedness is of no account. In the absence of evil, of powers acting contrary to the will of God, nakedness is not an occasion for shame. It does not create damaging vulnerability. In a broken world which does know the action of evil powers, or powers separated from their source which is God, nakedness does mean damaging vulnerability. Our shame and anxiety in the face of our vulnerability are proper responses to our condition. God's gift of clothing shows that this is so. This gift can also stand as a sign of God's care and love for the disobedient humans.

This line of interpretation probably came to me from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who presents this matter of shame about nakedness as a primal consequence of our fallen condition. It is noteworthy that in his ‘Ethics’⁹, shame at nakedness stands at the very beginning of the discussion. For Bonhoeffer, Christian ethics relates to the overcoming of the damage caused by the knowledge of good and evil.

The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge. ... Already in the possibility of the knowledge of good and evil Christian ethics discerns a falling away from the origin. Man¹⁰ at his origin knows only one thing: God. It is only in the unity of his knowledge of God that he knows of other men, of things, and of himself. He knows all things only in God, and God in all things. The knowledge of good and evil shows that he is no longer at one with this origin.¹¹

This radical reading of the story of the Fall (Genesis 1-3) seems to me to be faithful to the story in seeing that sin is the departure from God. The act which expresses this departure consolidates the break, but it is the separation from God which is crucial in Bonhoeffer’s account, not the act on its own. It is plausible to think that Bonhoeffer is correct in questioning the acceptability for Christians of this assumption of the freedom and autonomy of humans in decision-making .

In the knowledge of good and evil man does not understand himself in the reality of the destiny appointed in his origin, but rather in his own possibilities, his possibility of being good or evil. He knows himself now as something apart from God, outside God, and this means that he now knows only himself and no longer knows God at all; for he can know God only if he knows only God. The knowledge of good and evil is therefore separation from God. Only against God can man know good and evil.¹²

It is important to look more deeply into the links that Bonhoeffer posits between separation from God, knowledge of good and evil, awareness of nakedness and shame. Our created state is one of nakedness. When we are at one with God, this nakedness is no problem. When we are not at one with God, this nakedness causes us shame because it witnesses to the brokenness of our relationship with our origin, God. ‘Shame is man’s ineffaceable recollection of his estrangement from the origin; it is grief for

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Ed. E Bethge, Trans. NH Smith. (London: Fontana, Collins, 1964), 17-26.

¹⁰ I note that this text consistently uses masculine forms in a general sense, contrary to our contemporary sensitivities. I thank Duncan Reid for pointing out that this may be a matter of the translation rather than the original German.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 17.

¹² *Ibid.* 17-18.

this estrangement, and the powerless longing to return to unity with the origin'.¹³ Only then can we also talk about vulnerability to attack from hostile powers.

'They made themselves aprons' [Gen.3:7]. Shame seeks a covering as a means of overcoming the disunion. But the covering implies the confirmation of the disunion that has occurred, and it cannot therefore make good the damage. Man covers himself, conceals himself from men and from God. Covering is necessary because it keeps awake shame, and with it the memory of the disunion with the origin, and also because man, disunited as he is, must now withdraw himself and must live in concealment. Otherwise he would betray himself.¹⁴

For Bonhoeffer, shame (unlike remorse or guilt) is a direct sign of our fallen human condition. Remorse and guilt relate to the particular actions, choices and situations in which we can see the inadequacy of our individual histories. Shame arises from the primal reality of our separation from God and resists other explanations, according to Bonhoeffer. Our human desire for covering is therefore to be respected as a proper response to our condition.

Fig leaves were well in place in the world in which I grew up. Sexual matters in general were well covered by discretion, tact and respect for privacy. Of course, there was gossip, sex education and the occasional scandal, but there were limits in place that were observed, at least within my experience. Today, there seems to be little left of these cultural agreements about limitations on what should be publicly revealed, at least within Australian society. I can feel in myself a nostalgic desire for the apparent order and certainties of the church of this pre-liberation era. Still, I recognize the illusory character of my nostalgia. I concur with the judgement expressed by Walter Wink¹⁵, that it is inadequate to 'long for the hypocrisies of an earlier era'¹⁶.

Even raising these questions about sexuality and covering up our nakedness seems risky and uncomfortable to me, as I acknowledge that my natural tendency is to avoid having to talk – even indirectly – about things sexual. Also, I am quite uncomfortable about supporting censorship, even self-censorship. Still, natural limitations respected and accepted by all present are quite different from imposed limits on discourse. We continue to live with all kinds of contextual limitations on

¹³ *Ibid.* 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 21.

¹⁵ Walter Wink is Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary.

¹⁶ Wink, Walter. 'Homosexuality and the Bible', in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*, 45.

what constitutes appropriate communication and interaction, even as these shift and change from time to time.

A further reason for discomfort stems from my knowledge that what I am socialized to find normal is experienced as oppressive by some others. Does my comfort with culturally accepted fig leaves simply reflect my relatively sheltered upbringing and the particular attitudes of my parents? For me, fig leaf culture has worked benignly because there were not too many discrepancies between the public and the private realities. I know that this has not been the case for all too many of my contemporaries. The socially accepted limitations on the invasion of privacy that were in place in my youth have been widely condemned because they have provided shelter for such unacceptable things as child abuse. The power of the media to reveal scandalous secrets rests upon the genuine benefit of such revelation to society as well as to the people involved. Horrendous domestic oppression can be overcome when other people become involved. Yet even in this area, there remain difficult ethical considerations, as anyone wrongly accused of child abuse can attest. I conclude that we are torn between divergent impulses here, the impulses of respect for privacy and concern for victims of covert oppression.

It seems highly plausible to think that homosexuality, as an orientation of some members of all societies, has always been with us. Yet I have no real memories of any awareness of homosexuality before adulthood. I do remember stories about the behaviour of one or two of my fellow-students who were expelled from school. This relative innocence is unlikely to be true for most people growing up in Australia today. I recognize that it was also not true for those of my contemporaries for whom the traditional gender roles were unhelpful or even destructive. For these people, I can appreciate the genuine liberation of 'coming out', of not having to keep their own emotional reality hidden. I am not among those who regard it as offensive that people confront others with their difference. Offence can occur when the difference comes to be used as a weapon of attack and rejection; yet the assertion of the reality of difference does seem to be required where there is unjust discrimination and prejudice. I cannot find it within me to recommend a return to the expectation that homosexual people live in 'the closet'.

Still, we should ask whether this affirmation of 'coming out' is culturally possible only for those of us who share the humanistic, liberationist assumptions of contemporary left-wing western culture. Some of my friends from communities whose culture is not western have helped me to see that God may dwell in light but that our lives are lived in a mixture of

darkness and light. It is all very well for me to want to live without keeping secrets, but this does not give me the right to shout out the secrets of others. Similarly, I may hope for a world in which people can own up to identities traditionally frowned upon – or even despised – without suffering rejection and condemnation, but we obviously do not yet live in such a world, or even such a church. We should also remember that some cultures do not have words for many aspects of sexuality that can be expressed in English. There is a general taboo on talking about many aspects of sexuality. I conclude that we have yet to learn how these fundamental cultural differences are to be successfully negotiated in cross-cultural communication. This is a particular problem for the Uniting Church in Australia because of our multi-cultural reality and our commitment to collective oversight of church life through inter-related councils and the full sharing of all information relevant to an issue.

Writing from the perspective of the social sciences and his own pastoral experience, Robert Albers¹⁷ makes a helpful distinction between discretionary shame and disgrace shame¹⁸. Broadly speaking, discretionary shame relates to socially approved acts protective of privacy. A more commonplace word might be ‘modesty’. A person described as ‘shameless’ would be someone seen to be lacking in discretionary shame. Disgrace shame relates to the public uncovering of a person caught in socially disapproved actions and attitudes. This distinction seems to me broadly acceptable. It is helpful in providing us a road map for the renegotiation of cultural and social disapproval.¹⁹

Homosexual behaviour has historically been disapproved within societies influenced by Judaeo-Christian traditions. For a person to be publicly identified as homosexual has therefore been a matter of disgrace shaming. Since about 1972, what can be called the gay liberation movement has promoted a strong challenge to this culture of disgrace shaming. One

¹⁷ RH Albers. Shame: A Faith Perspective. (New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Ibid. 7-15.

¹⁹ There are many other perspectives on our general experience of shame. These perspectives sometimes assimilate shame to guilt, in that they identify specific aspects of ourselves which are culturally rejected. I find it plausible to follow those such as Albers who distinguish shame from guilt in terms of the distinction between act and being. We can experience guilt when we recognize that our own action has been wrong in some respect. Once we start to consider ourselves a bad person for doing such things, our experience moves into the area of shame. Disgrace shaming occurs when this unacceptable aspect is brought into the light of public attention. This shaming of individuals and groups can be seen to be socially constructed. The power of the shame would seem to be given by the intensity of the social repudiation of the negative aspect that is rejected. This power would seem to be negotiable, as it can conceivably be withdrawn when social and cultural values are redefined. This general concept of shame is anthropologically based. As such, it is quite distinct from the perspective offered us by Bonhoeffer.

central aspect of this campaign has been the encouragement of 'coming out'. The aim of gay liberation within the subsequent furor, discriminatory action and counter-action and discussion has been to remove the disgrace from homosexual identity. This aim has met with considerable success within Australian society since 1972.

One consequence of this situation has been that society in general and the churches in particular have had to reconsider the basis for rejecting homosexual identity. In terms of the attitudes of the European Enlightenment, it seems hard to condemn homosexual behaviour between consenting adults. How do they harm anybody? If they do harm to themselves, is that not their free choice? Are homosexual people completely free to choose this identity or is it somehow given to them without the possibility of developing another sexual orientation? These seem the most significant questions guiding the public debate in Australia. The emerging secular consensus in Australian public life, which can be seen in various kinds of anti-discriminatory legislation, would seem to be that adult homosexual people do not harm others through consenting sexual behaviour and that at least some of them do not have a real possibility of choosing another orientation. Whatever we may think of this within our church discussions, we need to recognize the current situation in the general community.

Those wishing to maintain a hard line against the acceptance of homosexual people as fellow citizens have found it very difficult to mount convincing counter-arguments. Indeed, it could be argued that secular society has tacitly or openly accepted the Enlightenment view for adults and is in the process of redrawing the traditional line more narrowly, with a focus on paedophilia. Within the churches, the main barrier to an easy acceptance of the Enlightenment position has been the existence of a small number of biblical texts which do seem to enshrine a divinely sanctioned condemnation of homosexual behaviour (notably Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 and Romans 1:26-32). There are a few other texts (such as 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10) which have some relevance, though these probably do not really contribute to a condemnation of homosexuality as such.

It is not clear whether 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10 refer to the 'passive' and 'active' partners in homosexual relationships, or to homosexual and heterosexual male prostitutes. In short, it is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone or promiscuity and 'sex for hire'.²⁰

²⁰ Wink, 34. Cf. DB Martin. 'Arsenokoites and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences', in Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality. Ed. RL Brawley. (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1996), 117-136. Martin does not accept the meanings given by Wink. Martin claims that we cannot be sure of the

One of the important questions highlighted by this debate has been that of the authority of the Bible. For me, the church is wise to remain unconvinced by voices that dismiss the biblical witness as irrelevant to present-day issues. It is important to respect the normative role of scripture in witnessing to God's revelation in the history of Israel and in Christ. Yet we must also recognize the difficulty of interpreting scripture correctly. The terms in which its witness is made are deeply historical in origin and meaning. I accept that scripture is inspired by the Spirit of God, but would add that interpretations also require a like inspiration. As Paul says, 'Our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life' (II Cor. 3:5-6). In this whole question, we are seeking to know God's will; for this, spiritual illumination is crucial. I conclude that we are required to engage earnestly with the Bible in seeking to know God's will, not just for the letter of the law, but for the word of God to our situation. For this, the whole Bible is potentially relevant, not simply a few isolated texts.

Later tradition associates the sinfulness of Sodom with homosexual lust, based on Genesis 19:1-11, though to use this story to justify condemnation of all forms of homosexual activity is, despite subsequent Christian assertions, highly implausible, as Walter Wink, among other commentators, has suggested.

Some passages that have been advanced as pertinent to the issue of homosexuality are, in fact, irrelevant. One is the attempted gang rape in Sodom (Gen. 19:1-29). That was a case of ostensibly heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them 'like women', thus demasculinizing them. (This is also the case in a similar account in Judges 19-21). Their brutal behaviour has nothing to do with the problem of whether genuine love expressed between consenting adults of the same sex is legitimate or not. Likewise Deut. 23:17-18 must be pruned from the list, since it most likely refers to male and female *prostitutes* involved in Canaanite fertility rituals that have infiltrated Israelite worship; whether these males are 'gay' or 'straight', a mature same-sex love relationship is not under discussion.

If Wink's interpretation is accepted, we need to question the basis of much of the mediaeval condemnation of sodomy, which is where our

meaning of the word '*arsenokoites*' due to the small number of extant occurrences of it in ancient literature. His suggestion is that it could refer to some kind of economic exploitation by sexual means. *Malakos*, by contrast, clearly means 'effeminate'. Martin argues that neither word provides an unambiguous condemnation of homoerotic behaviour as such.

modern attitudes would seem to have been significantly shaped²¹. The biblical story makes it clear that the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah was so grave that God sent two angels to destroy these cities and, as later belief had it, to cover the area with the salt waters of the Dead Sea. If this sinfulness was based upon the general practice of same-sex intercourse, then the belief that God is uniquely offended by this practice would seem to have some basis. If we do not accept this reading of the story, but instead focus on the inhospitality and attempted victimization of strangers as the evidence of sinfulness, the sense of same sex intercourse as a uniquely offensive behaviour in the eyes of God becomes much less plausible.

In discussing the Leviticus texts, Wink acknowledges the clarity of the rejection of male homosexual acts, with the punishment of death. He understandably takes refuge in the New Testament. With regard to the Romans passage, he presents the case that Paul thought that the people whose behaviour he was condemning were by nature 'straight', so that their homosexual acts were indeed contrary to their nature.²² This is a possible narrowing of the force of the passage, though we should acknowledge that Paul is making a very general case about human sin with this as a flagrant example. Marion Soards²³ gives a more traditional interpretation of this passage.

As Paul discerned and declared God's relationship to humans, homosexual acts were outside the boundaries of God's intentions for humanity. Homosexuality was one vivid indication of the real problem of sin, and Paul states bluntly that all humans are sinners. On the matter of homosexuality, we should see clearly that the biblical understanding of homosexuality is univocal (although this issue is at most a minor concern). Homosexual activity is not consistent with the will of God; it is not merely a sin but evidence of sin, and there is no way to read the Bible as condoning homosexual acts.²⁴

I do not feel as confident as Soards that this is the only way to read the Bible in relation to this question. I am more impressed by the large areas of silence and the evident distortions in some of the traditional interpretations. I conclude that both liberals and conservatives have an almost persuasive reading of these texts, though this brief survey can hardly be taken as the last word on such a weighty question. Soards

²¹ This is the central concern of Mark Jordan's study of this process. Cf. M. Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy.

²² Ibid., 34-37.

²³ Marion Soards is Professor of New Testament Studies at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

²⁴ Marion Soards. Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today. (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1995), 23-24.

largely acknowledges the areas of silence, but claims that biblical statements all go in one direction. He goes on to discuss the pastoral implications of his general conclusions about homosexuality.

While the church cannot offer approval of homosexual activity, the church can also not deny the validity of faith in less-than-perfect humans. If approval of one's homosexual behaviour becomes a condition for one's joining the church, then the church faces an insurmountable problem; for Christians seeking to recognize and to honour the authority of the Bible will insist that no such approval is possible. If there is no demand for approval of homosexual activity, there is no reason to deny church membership to the homosexual who takes his or her place along with other forgiven sinners in the corporate body of Christ.²⁵

I would read this to mean that the church should offer full acceptance of people prior to any discussion of what behaviour is or is not acceptable within the community of believers. I think Soards makes an important point in resisting requests for specific approval by the church for homosexual activity. Who made us judges of the sexuality of others? If we can indeed reduce the significance of the debate to a conversation about acceptability within the community of faith, we can go on to ask whether this matter is not primarily between the individual and God. If we do reach this conclusion, I think it then becomes a responsibility of the church to defend this understanding of the situation. Conservatives need to be restrained from seeking the expulsion of homosexual people as such (i.e. without citing further causes) from the church. Homosexual people are asked to live with an ambiguous welcome if the church finds itself unable to provide a clear word of affirmation for homosexual activity, which seems to be our present situation. We are left with a continuing tug-of-war between homosexual people wanting affirmation and a church that is not able to affirm without ambiguity.

This is clearly a recommendation for an unstable, holding pattern in the life of the church. This may be as well as we can do in our generation on this issue. We are dealing with a monumental cultural shift in the life of the church and we should not expect to achieve settled judgements, let alone comfortable arrangements, in our life-time. We are, I believe, the 'guinea pig' generation in this matter. This is why I think we need to review our disdain for fig leaves. For what my analysis seems to leave us with, liberal and conservative alike, is a set of fig leaf aprons. Walter Wink offers us a careful, serious and honest interpretation of the biblical material which opens the way for full acceptance and inclusion of homosexual people in the life of the church. Marion Soards offers us a

²⁵ Ibid., 76.

pastorally caring but principled resistance to affirming homosexual activity as possible for Christians. Whatever our conclusions, we should follow – not our own preferences but – the Holy Spirit’s leading in our attempts to discern the will of God. When the fig leaves of our devising prove effective and reliable for covering, we receive a kind of confirmation that God is blessing our work.

The focus of this paper has been on general Christian teaching about homosexuality and the inclusion of openly homosexual people in the life of the church. When ask about the possible ordination of such people, further considerations come into play which would require another paper. Briefly, it seems to me that the church should have no problem about special friendships, though these may affect the fittedness of some people for ordination, as previously suggested. It may also affect the availability of people for specific roles and responsibilities in the life of the church, as we see with many married ministers. Can we leave the matter of sexual dimensions of special relationships to the relatively private realm of the people themselves and their relationship with God? How these friendships are presented more publicly, particularly when the sexual dimension is salient, is rightly of concern to the wider church. Still, the heart of our struggle is with the unresolved and humanly unresolvable tensions within the Christian community when homosexual relationships are in question.

If we take our cue from Bonhoeffer, we might come to recognize that our cultural attitudes towards homosexuality are inevitably based upon our human knowledge of good and evil. If we do seek to invalidate our knowledge of good and evil as Bonhoeffer suggests, we probably wipe out most of our cultural markers for acceptability and rejection, whether conservative, liberal or radical. These markers return once we try to interpret biblical teaching about God’s self-revelation, but they do so under the shadow of God’s judgement, not our human judgement. This seems to me to bring us all to a common level before God. None of us have standing in the presence of God apart from God’s gracious call into fellowship on the basis of the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the forgiveness of sins. Considerations such as these seem to me to lie at the heart of the arguments for an inclusive attitude to church membership. They also point in the direction of a Christian responsibility to care for those who are different and vulnerable because of the difference.

Staying close to the theme of God’s judgement about human sinfulness, we can remember the gift of clothing which went with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. It seems obvious that nothing can be hidden from God. It seems that God supports the hiding of

nakedness from others, human and non-human. We can go on to think that when we encounter another in mutual or one-sided nakedness (physical and/or metaphorical), we come objectively closer to the perspective in which God knows us and others. Such encounters are clearly marked out as specially significant. They represent occasions on which our clothing, God-given or self-fabricated, is no longer present. Such occasions would seem to be part of God's blessing upon us when God is present and honoured. When our particular nakedness leads to our rejection, God is not to be thought of as truly absent, but we come into the area indicated by the phrase 'divine judgement'. As followers of Christ, we need a special sensitivity to the likeness to Jesus on the cross of those under human condemnation, whose covering has been stripped from them.

I have already put forward the plea that Christian discussions attend to a wide range of biblical passages in seeking direction in our present struggles. Recently, I was required to comment on the reading for that morning, Luke 5:33-39. In this passage, Jesus is asked about his disciples eating and drinking instead of fasting and praying. Jesus replies in terms of the presence of the bridegroom with them, that is, his own Messianic presence, which requires celebration. Luke then attaches seemingly different sayings to this story, about not tearing a piece from a new garment to patch an old (a stupid thing to do!) and not putting new wine into old wineskins. He is clearly seeing the coming of Jesus as a new thing which requires new forms of reception and response. So new wine must be put into new wineskins, as anyone who wants the wine to stay within its container would agree. So we are led to the thought that the Holy Spirit can lead us to new things in the life of the church and that the containers for this newness must themselves be renewed. This seems to be saying that God is on the side of the new.

But then the text goes on to say something rather puzzling, at least, in the majority of manuscript sources. It comments on the foregoing that no-one after drinking old wine desires the new, but concurs in the judgement that the old is better. This makes sense when we reflect that storing wine is usually for years so that it may mature. We prefer to drink the mature wine. The history of this text may give us an unexpected window on the struggles in the early church between those emphasizing the newness of Christ and those emphasizing the continuity of Christ with God's covenant people, the Jews. I note that one of the early witnesses lacking the text favouring the old is Marcion. I conclude that the text shows us our need to welcome and accommodate the genuinely new that God brings us. It also shows us that our human comfort is served by the time matured – but only if we have been successful in providing appropriate fresh

covering for the new. This sounds to me like a call to take up the sewing kit and gather fig leaves.

John's Gospel offers us some suggestive themes for this work, particularly that of friendship. 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (John 15:15). Christian friendship is firstly with Jesus, but surely then also with all the others who share in this friendship with Jesus. There can be modern equivalents to idolatry where our friendships block us from friendship with those outside our closed circle, whether the circle is formed by nation or race or gang or household or gender or even the special friendships of marriage or marriage-like relationships. The gospel challenges all of us to follow the call of Christ beyond these more limited loyalties, important as they are. Within friendship, there is a necessary privacy which derives from the basic structure of our human experience. We cannot truly make public the inner reality of friendship. The emotional element and the sharing of lived experience resist effective public naming, let alone full truthful disclosure.

We may want to recommend that homosexual relationships be reframed in our thinking and our public statements in terms of friendship, which is a suggestion that I personally favour. This is a fig leaf of a policy which will be met with contempt by those for whom homosexual relationships are anathema. Yet we may find that the spiritual depths touched by the reality of friendship convey to us, in time, the recognition that it is God who meets us here with a covering for our nakedness that we cannot despise.

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