

Baptist Churches of Tasmania

**HUMANSEXUALITY,
MARRIAGE
AND
CHURCHLEADERSHIP**

The Council of the Baptist Union of Tasmania, at their meeting on 17th February 2001, accepted a recommendation from the Pastoral Committee, to adopt as Tasmanian 'in principle' policy, the statement formulated by the Baptist Union of New South Wales regarding 'Human Sexuality, Marriage and Church Leadership.

Human Sexuality, Marriage and Church Leadership

PREAMBLE

At the June 1998 meeting of the Executive Committee of the Baptist Union of NSW, it was decided to appoint a Task Force to consider the question of human sexuality, particularly as it relates to leadership in a local church or the denomination, and to present a report to the Executive Committee. This paper is that report. It seeks to present a Christian view of sex and marriage, and to provide guidelines to address the issues of *de facto* relationships and homosexuality as they affect church attitudes and church leadership. Four things lie behind this paper.

- It is presented against a background of changing patterns of behaviour in society. Two of these changes which prompted the paper are (a) the growing acceptance of *de facto* relationships and (b) the increasing acceptance of homosexual behaviour.
- It acknowledges the primary authority of the Bible in discerning a Christian view of the issues it covers.
- It has endeavoured to recognise the differences between the societies the Bible first addressed and our own but affirms that, despite these differences, there are certain ideals which do not change. The challenge for Christian discipleship is to identify what these values are and how they are embodied in sexual ethics.
- It accepts the truth that we are flawed and fallen people and that we often fail to live up to the divine ideal.

GOD, SEX AND MARRIAGE

We affirm that we are sexual beings. While this does not say all that could be said about being human, sexuality drives much that we do.

1.1. Sexuality is an integral part of our lives.

The creation stories of Genesis 1-2 teach that God created humanity as “male and female”. We are gendered beings. Much of what we do therefore comes out of our self-understanding of what it means to be male or female. The sum of our self-understandings and behaviours as male or female is often referred to as our “sexuality”. What we do with our sexual organs is one dimension of our sexuality.

Genesis 1:26-28 notes that it is only a male and female *co-humanity* that can fulfil God’s commission to fill and rule the world. Genesis 2:24 concludes that it is the need for one another that drives men and women to be united in marriage.

At times, some within the Christian church have denigrated, and even despised

both sexual desire and its expression in sexual intercourse. It is now recognised that this was due to the influence of certain Greek philosophical ideas which saw the body, with its desires and pleasures, as evil, over against the “spirit” (or “soul”) which was thought to be good. The Bible however gives an important place to the body. We were created as embodied beings, and one way in which we express this is through our sexuality (1 Corinthians 6:12 -20).

1.2. Love is the defining mark of all Christian behaviour.

Jesus pointed his disciples to the central place of love in Christian ethics when he taught that love for God and love for others lies at the centre of God’s will. This is reiterated throughout the New Testament (Romans 13:10, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 John 3:16, 4:13 -21). Whatever other guidelines we apply to sexual expression, love must be part of that expression if it is to be truly Christian.

1.3. Sexuality can be distorted by sin.

The “curses” of Genesis 3 affirm that human sin (rebellion against the will of God) has had unfortunate consequences for human existence, including our sexuality and sexual behaviour.

Sexual behaviour can easily become selfish. It can become the desire to experience sexual pleasure without proper regard for the other person. Sex can be one means by which one person exercises power and control over another. Rape is the most violent form of this. Sexual behaviour can become divorced from relationship and love, and people can be manipulated or forced into sexual acts which are unwanted and/or unhelpful.

THE BIBLE AND MARRIAGE

There is no one model of marriage in the Bible. The Old Testament refers to several patterns which are not accepted in our society today, e.g. polygamy, concubine and *levir* marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5 -10). However, the meaning and purpose of marriage, as traditionally accepted in the Christian Church, can be seen in four biblical passages.

2.1. Genesis 1

Here the picture is of God calling the world into being over a period of six days and giving to the various animate creatures the command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (v.22). It is this need that explains (in part at least) the sexual differentiation of the animate world, including human beings. The creation of humankind as male and female is followed by the same command to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth”. The implication is that the populating of the earth will be achieved through the sexual union of male and fe-

male. Genesis 1 therefore emphasizes sexual differentiation for the purposes of procreation. However, it would be wrong to conclude that procreation is the *only* or *primary* reason people may engage in sexual intercourse.

2.2. Genesis 2

Genesis 2:18 -25 points rather to the complementary natures of men and women and sexual intercourse as a celebration of their partnership. Verse 18 declares that “it is not good for the man to be alone”. Thus God creates another person, of opposite gender, and unites them in marriage. In becoming “one flesh” (v.24) (seen by most scholars as involving sexual intercourse) the aloneness of each is overcome.

It should be noted that marriage is not the only means by which human aloneness is overcome. We can experience deep interpersonal relationships in a variety of contexts (eg our families of origin and close friendships such as those shared by David and Jonathon and by Jesus, Mary and Martha).

It is appropriate to see Genesis 1 and 2 as complementary. Genesis 1 focuses on the procreative aspect of sexual intercourse while in Genesis 2 the emphasis is placed on the way in which it expresses the closeness of relationship.

2.3. Song of Songs

Like Genesis 2:18 -25, the Song of Songs celebrates the relational dimension of sexual intercourse. The song is an emotionally charged and deeply erotic love poem leading to love's consummation in marriage. Though some understand it to be an allegory of God's love for his people, most commentators recognise that this was not its original intent. Rather it speaks of the sexual celebration of a human love relationship. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that in a community in which procreation was highly esteemed the poem makes no mention of the procreative function of sex. The emphasis is placed firmly upon the delight two lovers take in one another's bodies.

2.4. 1 Corinthians 7:1 -7

Some have seen this passage as denigrating marriage and sexual intercourse. That seems to be a distorted interpretation. Whatever Paul says that can be construed as a negative evaluation of marriage needs to be seen as a response to an (unexplained) “impending crisis” facing the Christians at Corinth (v.26). More recent commentators see the passage addressing an ascetic argument adopted by some Christians in Corinth. They suggested that all sexual relations were to be avoided, even between husband and wife. (Verse 1 quotes the Corinthians—”it is well for a man not to touch a woman”=“have sexual relations with a woman” - so NIV margin). Paul's response is to affirm celibacy for

those who are so gifted and to affirm marriage, and a full sexual relationship within it, for those who are not so gifted. Rather than denigrating sexual intercourse, Paul recognises it has an important and legitimate place within married life.

2.5. Ephesians 5:21 —33

Paul's positive attitude toward marriage can be seen in his use of the marriage relationship as an analogy of that between Christ and the church.

These scriptures stand behind the traditional Christian viewpoint, that marriage is the life-long, voluntary union of a man and a woman, and is God's intended setting for sexual intercourse. It is one of God's most precious gifts and includes both the pleasure husband and wife find in each other, and the hope of procreation.

We believe that the biblical ideal for the acceptance and expression of our sexuality is in such marriage, and is best secured by the principle of chastity for those who are unmarried and faithfulness for those who are married. The church has an obligation to teach and uphold this biblical ideal and to demonstrate the benefits that come when it is maintained.

For many unmarried people embracing this ideal involves struggle and tension. In our churches this should be met with a genuinely empathetic and loving pastoral response. Churches should seek to create an environment in which single Christians can be honest and open about their sexuality and find support for their Christian journey.

DEFACTO RELATIONSHIPS

We have already noted that there is no single model of marriage in the bible. We should not assume that our traditional Western model is the only model Christians accept. This raises the question of the status of de facto relationships. Three views can be found in the Christian community.

3.1. De facto relationships never count as marriage

To be classified as a marriage a relationship must be exclusive; publicly acknowledged at some event; permanent (or at least entered with this intention); and consummated by sexual intercourse. De facto relationships fail on these second count and often on the third as well.

3.2. De facto relationships may count as marriage

This view accepts the criteria for marriage noted above, with the exception that the relationship be publicly entered into. This is thought to be a feature of cul-

ture not necessity. Any de facto relationship marked by exclusivity, the intention of permanence, and consummation in sexual intercourse should be considered a marriage. If there is no genuine intention of permanency it cannot classify as a marriage.

3.3. De facto relationships always count as marriage

Some suggest that sexual union makes two people “one flesh” and it is this which defines them as married. Others argue that a de facto relationship involves two people in an ongoing commitment to one another which includes exclusivity and a sexual relationship. While they may not identify themselves as “married”, they are married in the eyes of God.

SOME GUIDELINES

The following are suggested.

4.1. Guideline 1

That churches recognise “the need to preserve and protect the institution of marriage as the union of a man and woman to the exclusion of all others voluntarily entered into for life” (Family Law Act, Section 43). In an age in which the permanency of marriage commitments are being eroded the public formalising of relationships provides a strong individual and communal reinforcing of the values of Christian marriage.

4.2. Guideline 2

That churches recognise that not all de facto relationships are alike. At one end of the spectrum are de facto couples who consider their relationship as permanent and binding as a formalised marriage, while at the other end are those in casual live-in relationships. An appropriate pastoral response should be determined on a case by case basis.

4.3. Guideline 3

That whatever convictions a church holds concerning the theological status of de facto relationships they ought to welcome and accept those in such relationships. The church should seek to provide an environment in which de facto couples can be honest and open about their relationship, at an appropriate time consider the status of their relationship before God, and find support in a journey into Christian maturity.

4.4. Guideline4

The Baptist Churches of Tasmania will not accredit for ordination or for any other ministry in or on behalf of the Baptist Churches of Tasmania, people living in defacto relationships.

HOMOSEXUALITY

We believe that there is a distinction to be made between homosexual orientation (the causes of which are much debated) and homosexual behaviour. Homosexual orientation describes a person's feelings of sexual desire and attraction being predominantly oriented towards people of the same sex. Homosexual behaviour is sexual activity with a person(s) of the same sex, in preference to either heterosexual activity or sexual abstinence. The Bible speaks only about homosexual genital behaviour and not about homosexual orientation, and sees people as responsible for their behaviour.

Before proceeding we recognise that a wide variety of sexual orientations exist in our society. These include heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and asexuality.

FOUR VIEWS AMONG BAPTISTS

Research has shown that there are at least four approaches to this issue to be found among Australian Baptist churches.

5.1. Biblical ethical values do not change.

Both Old and New Testaments condemn homosexuality, and that evaluation applies today. It is true that Jesus does not mention homosexuality; but nor does he mention rape, incest, child abuse, and other questionable practices.

In marked contrast with this approach is the next.

5.2. We need to revise Biblical ethical values which no longer apply in our changed social context.

This principle is seen within the bible in the revision of laws relating to the Sabbath, circumcision, food etc. In more recent times Christians have come to see that slavery, lawful in New Testament times for Christians, is not in harmony with the gospel. This principle is then applied to law on homosexuality and a new ethic is sought which will inspire homosexual people to engage with the demands of discipleship, instead of alienating them from God and the church.

5.3. Homosexuality is a distortion of the divine plan for sexuality.

This plan is to be discerned in such scriptures as Genesis 2:18 —25. One result of the 'fall' is the distortion of sexual expression and the possibility of unfaithfulness in marriage. Again, Paul's dissertation in Ephesians 5:22ff on the marriage relationship, where it is used as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church, highlights God's original plan for the relationship between man and woman.

5.4. We need to observe the way in which Jesus dealt with people

Jesus' attitude to society's 'outcasts' was welcoming, loving and accepting, without condoning sin. The church must be at the very least, welcoming, loving and accepting of all people, including homosexual persons, allowing them to share the journey of faith.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE

6.1. Recent challenges to traditional church teaching

The Bible refers to homosexual behaviour on a number of occasions. In each instance the behaviour is described as contrary to God's will. The traditional position of the Church has been that these Scriptures teach homosexual intercourse is always a violation of God's will. In recent years some have challenged this understanding. They suggest that the texts dealing with homosexuality have been either misunderstood or misapplied to the issue of homosexual relationships today. It is beyond the scope of this paper to overview or respond to these. The challenges have been considered, but were not found to be convincing. Thus this paper affirms the traditional understanding.

6.2. The broader biblical context

When developing a biblical perspective of homosexuality it is important to take into account both those biblical passages which speak directly to the issue *and* the broader biblical approach to sexual relationships. The broader context suggests that the marriage relationship of a man and woman is the morally normative environment for sexual intercourse and that those who do not share this relationship are called to celibacy (eg Genesis 2:18 —25, 1 Corinthians 7).

6.3. Specific Texts Referring to Homosexuality

a) **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13**

These passages condemn all forms of homosexual sex. A dominant theme, in this part of Leviticus, is that God's people must be holy as God is holy. Human sexuality is one of the issues dealt with under this theme, and it is clear that sexuality and holiness belong together.

b) **Romans 1:26 — 27**

This is the most significant of all the biblical texts proscribing homosexual behaviour. Verse 27 clearly describes male homosexual acts, and it would seem that the phrase "in the same way" refers to female homosexual behaviour in verse 26.

c) **1 Corinthians 6:9 — 10 and 1 Timothy 1:9 — 10**

These are "vice lists", catalogues of behaviour which disqualify people from the kingdom of God. There is some linguistic uncertainty attaching to the words used in 1 Corinthians 6:9, but we believe that the language refers to some form of homosexual behaviour.

It should not be overlooked that homosexual behaviour is only one of the vices on these lists, and that it does not earn any stronger condemnation than e.g. greed and drunkenness.

SOME GUIDELINES

The following are suggested.

7.1. **Guideline 1**

That churches be encouraged to develop a climate in which homosexual people can be honest and open about their sexual identity and find support in a journey into Christian maturity. At present, in some situations, homosexual people may find themselves marginalised and treated with suspicion if they allow their sexual orientation to be known, even if they have committed themselves to permanent celibacy. An environment that discourages honesty and openness will inevitably fail to encourage growth in Christian maturity.

7.2. **Guideline 2**

That churches be encouraged to follow the example of Jesus Christ in offering gracious hospitality to those who feel themselves to be outcasts (including homosexuals). Churches which fail to offer such hospitality should be encouraged to repent and change.

7.3. Guideline3

That on the basis of the grace available in Christ, churches should encourage those for whom homosexuality is an issue to seek assistance, counselling, and to believe that change and healing may be possible through the motivating and enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

7.4. Guideline4

That churches should encourage a culture that honours and supports all people who choose a lifetime of permanent celibacy.

7.5. Guideline5

On the basis of the grace available in Christ, people engaging in homosexual behaviour should be called on to repent and change their behaviour through the power of the Holy Spirit.

7.6. Guideline6

The Baptist Churches of Tasmania will not accredit for ordination or for any other ministry in or on behalf of the Baptist Churches of Tasmania, people involved in or promoting homosexual behaviour.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH

- 8.1.** All people are created in the image of God, and are called to live in love, mercy and justice. Christian people have entrusted themselves to Jesus Christ, and become a priesthood of believers, called to embody and proclaim the kingdom of God, with its unconditional love, its gracious gift of salvation through faith, its call to repentance, and its promise of resurrection to new life for all creation.
- 8.2.** Together we are the church, a body of redeemed sinners for whom Christ has given himself in love. As the church, our lives are distinguished from others by our commitment to following Christ on the journey into wholeness and holiness. We have committed ourselves to allowing the Spirit of God to progressively sanctify us, so that in every area of our lives, including our sexuality and its behavioural expression, we are growing into ever increasing conformity to the image of God.
- 8.3.** People who are to exercise leadership in the church minister out of their own brokenness through Christ's call and redemptive love. They are to be people who express and exhibit a commitment to pursuing the highest levels of wholeness and holiness, because their views and their behaviour will influence the views and

behaviour of others.

- 8.4. Human sexuality is a sacred gift of God. However, our alienation from God has damaged every area of our lives and consequently every person's sexual experience and expression fall short of the glory of the gift and its Giver.
- 8.5. A person's sexual orientation is not, in itself, a factor in determining their suitability for participation in the church's life, including leadership and accredited/ordained ministry. A person's sexual practice, however, legitimately influences such a determination.
- 8.6. Recognising that Christians are people on a journey into wholeness and holiness through the grace and power of God, we also recognise our failures, frailties and sinfulness as baggage on that journey, and so we acknowledge that specific ministries may be debarred from us on account of those specific failures, frailties and sinfulness.
- 8.7. Should a Baptist church consider the appointment of a person to a position of pastoral ministry, who is sexually active outside marriage, it should be aware that such a person would first need to be personally confronted with the values outlined in this paper, and that should repentance not occur, they would not be eligible to seek denominational accreditation for ordination or any other ministry in or on behalf of the Baptist Churches of Tasmania.

As with any church appointment, the local church is responsible for its actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION BY ASSEMBLY

1. **Dealing with applications for accreditation for ordination or for any other ministry from persons who engage in sexual relationships outside marriage.**

The Baptist Union of Tasmania will not knowingly accredit, for ordination or any other ministry, persons who engage in sexual relationships outside the marriage relationship of a man and a woman. Applications for accreditation for ordination or for any other ministry from persons involved in sexual relationships outside of marriage will be declined.

2. **Putting the policy into practice.**

Upon preliminary enquiry regarding accreditation for ordination or for any other ministry candidates will be made aware of the Union's policies on eligibility for accreditation as in 1 above. Upon application, candidates will be asked whether there is anything in those policies which would call into question their suitability for ministry in or on behalf of our churches.

Further, in all requests for reports and references from other parties the Union's policy will be advised as in 1 above.

Unless there is evidence to justify pursuing the matter further, the candidate's answers will be accepted as settling the question.

3. Dealing with revelations of sexual relations outside the marriage relationship by accredited ministers and persons in other ministries as defined in 1 above.

If it is alleged that an accredited person is involved in sexual relationships outside the marriage relationship of a man and a woman the matter will be referred to the Committee for the Ministry which will investigate the circumstances of the allegation, and if necessary, bring a recommendation to Assembly. Throughout this process, the Committee for the Ministry will do all it can to preserve confidentiality and act with pastoral sensitivity. The grounds upon which a person's name is to be removed from an accredited list will not be disclosed unless so requested by that person.



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