

LIVING  
IN LOVE  
& FAITH  
A biblical  
response



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**Martin Davie**

Foreword by Michael Nazir-Ali

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# Foreword

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We are, once again, in Martin Davie's debt. God has given him valuable gifts of discernment, analysis and vision which he has always put at the service of his church and of Christians generally. I had the privilege of working with him on many committees and commissions of the Church of England when he held responsibility for shaping its theological reflection. It is a sad sign of the times that he no longer has this responsibility. He has not, however, rested on his laurels, but has continued to espouse the need for clear thinking and writing on the issues facing the church and the world.

The somewhat long-drawn-out *Living in Love and Faith* process has, at last, resulted in some teaching and learning resources for the church in the areas of human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. This is to be welcomed, but those who were expecting some definitive teaching in this area from the House of Bishops – whether in affirming the traditional teaching of the church in these matters, or in setting out some new understanding – will be disappointed.

Martin has provided a sympathetic but also critical (in the best sense of that word) response to the materials that have emerged. I will not repeat what he has said – I will let him speak for himself. I will, however, make some comments on the leading issues as I see them, to which Martin has so valuably drawn our attention.

The first question is about knowing the truth. How do we know what is true, life-giving and beneficial for our personal

and social lives? This question is now more important than ever because of the widespread rejection of any claim that the world, and we ourselves, are a 'given'. We must respect and work with this 'given' if we are to survive and flourish within God's creation. Instead, we have a pandemic of 'constructivism' – that is to say, the claim that we can construct our own identities, relationships and world views in any way we choose. As we might expect, such abuse of our God-given freedom leads to an atomistic monadism of the individual<sup>1</sup>, the fragmentation of society, and the end of the family with its mutuality of obligations and privileges. Instead of a legitimate diversity in unity, we have sheer and increasingly chaotic diversity.

As we acknowledging our morally and spiritually fallen state, let us learn from God's purposes in the way he ordered creation. What is the proper way to exercise our God-given stewardship of it? What thoughts and acts will degrade and pollute it? We must ask the same questions of the ordering of human relationships and of human society. Once again, in spite of our fallenness, we see the hand of providence working through these, providing order and stability, so that human enterprise and creativity may be optimal, and so that the good news of the gospel may be freely proclaimed and heard.

Martin points out that the LLF process seeks to pay attention to the disciplines of the sciences and the social sciences. This can indeed be illuminating, enabling us to see how divine providence is at work in creation and in society. He believes, however, that LLF tends to look only at evidence

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1. That is, a view of individuality which devalues social interaction and responsibility in favour of radical autonomy.

which favours social revisionism, and to neglect evidence which may favour a view of society evolving in accordance with deeply-rooted custom and tradition.

If the 'book of creation' is one way of understanding the nature and purpose of the world and of ourselves in it, another book, namely the Bible, is the other, and normative way of knowing the truth about ourselves. The Bible does not simply reiterate what we know about the natural world, human society and our existential situation. It affirms and confirms the possibility of objective knowledge of our fellow creatures and of ourselves; more, it clarifies our flawed and limited knowing and, where necessary, corrects and augments what we know naturally. Its character as *ephapax*, as 'once for all' revealed truth, requires the church constantly to examine its life and teaching in the light of Scripture. It is not just for devotional reading and meditation, and for reading in public worship, essential though these are. It must also be normative in the ordering of our common life, in our personal discipleship and in our witness to the world. It is not some merely mystical text, parts of which may from time to time inspire us. It is rather the very word of God written, setting out a framework for living and ordering our lives so we may reach our destiny safely.

Anglican practice has long valued a deep study of the Bible: the establishing of the most reliable text, how its various books have been compiled and edited, what written and oral sources might lie behind the texts and how they should be used in preaching and evangelization. This should not, however, detract from its clarity in matters of salvation, especially where that involves conduct which may affect our salvation. By defining the Canon of both Testaments,



the church has recognised the nature and definitiveness of the revelation contained in the canonical books. This is the basis of their unique authority, and the teaching of the church has to be in continuity with them, seeking to evaluate in their light every new situation and every claim to knowledge. Only in this way will the church conserve its teaching and apply it to settle new questions as they arise. In this sense, the church's authentic tradition (that is the continual passing on of the faith) cannot contradict Scripture and Scripture will not contradict it.

Martin has rightly called our attention to the kind of 'double listening' advocated by Christian leaders like John Stott. This is a most valuable way of seeking guidance in our world today. The engaging of the two horizons of human knowledge and biblical teaching is necessary if we are to teach and witness credibly in today's society. We should be clear, however, that normativity here belongs to God's revelation in Christ as faithfully recorded in the Bible; it does not rest on the changing paradigms of science or the replaceable theories of social sciences, though we give them respectful attention. Thus, when social historians tell us that understanding the importance of the human person arises from the biblical insistence of a personal relationship with God, as opposed to the merely communal emphases of the ancient religions, we can welcome that as an authentic coming together of the two horizons.

On the other hand, the mutating of a Christian view of inalienable human dignity into the autonomy of the individual (which lies behind so many of the identity issues being investigated by LLF) will be shown to be false when examined against the full range of biblical anthropology. This is also true of marriage: who it is for; its requirement

of a proper complementarity between the partners; the mutual, exclusive and permanent commitment it demands; its ordering towards procreation and the nurture of any children; and, above all, its sacramental nature as showing the relation of Christ to his church. All these are features which cannot simply be transferred to other relationships where such requirements cannot be fulfilled. Again, it is basic Bible teaching which will govern our response to demands for reform and revision of marriage law, whether in the church or in society more generally.

It is always useful for churches and congregations to have resources for the study of an urgent contemporary issue. LLF provides some of these resources, and bodies like the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) have provided others in response. All of these will, no doubt, be taken up and, we hope, used profitably. Of course, this does not excuse those who have been called in the church specifically to teach 'the whole counsel of God' from continuing to do so. The Ordinal, attached to the *Book of Common Prayer*, tells us that priests are called to be 'messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord; to teach and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family.' They are asked if they will 'banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word.' Bishops, similarly, are asked whether they will faithfully 'exercise' themselves in Holy Scripture so they may be able to 'teach and exhort with wholesome doctrine, and to withstand and convince the gainsayers.' The fact that the church is engaged in a long study process must not stop the authentic teachers from carrying out this responsibility – even, nay especially, in our situation of social and personal confusion about human identity, sexuality, relationships, and the nature and purpose of marriage.

In all of the above, we need to keep together the necessity of (i) being truthful about the human condition and the Bible's offer of saving us from ourselves *and* (ii) being loving towards our fellow human beings as made in God's image and for whom Christ died. This means we have to love and respect those with whom we disagree, and pray that God will lead us all to that fullness of truth revealed in Christ, recorded in the Bible, and preached in the church.

Martin has given us the wherewithal to stand firm on the teaching of the Bible and the unvarying teaching of the church in these matters. He has provided for those with teaching responsibility that they might teach faithfully and confidently, taking full account of different opinions in the church and the world – while, at the same time, setting out clearly what revelation and our own perception of creation shows us. He has also provided the church with resources for staying faithful in a way that retains a 'principled comprehensiveness' but without compromise on matters that are essential. Many, like myself, will be grateful for this service.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Nazir-Ali". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small cross at the end of the last word.

**+Michael Nazir-Ali**

Lent, 2021

# Author's Preface

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The purpose of this book is to give clergy and members of the Church of England a summary of the *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF) material and to respond to it in an informed way.<sup>2</sup>

To avoid confusion between this book and the LLF material, the *Living in Love and Faith* book is cited by its full title or by LLF where there could be any ambiguity. This may seem a little cumbersome at times, but it seems worth it for the sake of clarity.

This book has six main chapters.

**Chapter 1 – An introduction to *Living in Love and Faith*** explains the background to the production of LLF, the contents and purpose of the LLF material, and how the LLF process will be continued by the Next Steps Group, the House of Bishops, and the Church of England as a whole.

**Chapter 2 – A summary of *Living in Love and Faith*** walks through the whole LLF book, outlining its structure and summarizing the contents of each section.

**Chapter 3 – A theological response to *Living in Love and Faith*** provides a biblical response to LLF in the light of the calling of Christians to live as a distinctive people who act as salt and light in the midst of the idolatry of contemporary Western society.

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2. Church of England, *Living in Love and Faith* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020). A pdf of the book (and all the accompanying resources) is available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>, accessed 19 February 2021.

**Chapter 4 – A theological response: assessing the *Living in Love and Faith* material** offers a detailed, theological assessment of the material.

**Chapter 5 – The traditional Anglican view of Scripture and *Living in Love and Faith*** examines the LLF material in the light of the traditional Anglican evangelical view of the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture as God’s word written.

**Chapter 6 – Where do we go from here?** considers how evangelicals should be involved in the Next Steps process, which will continue the process of discernment begun in LLF, and lead to decisions by the Church of England’s House of Bishops and General Synod.

The book ends with a **Conclusion**, some **FAQs** and **Further resources**.

Criticism of LLF should not be taken to imply any criticism of those evangelicals involved in the LLF process. They did the very best they could, given the mandate under which they were operating, and a debt of gratitude is owed to them for the good things which the LLF material contains.

I have worked with a number of people in bringing together this book. I am very grateful to them for their support, advice and suggestions, but the responsibility for the finished product rests with me as the principal author.

**Martin Davie**

Theological Consultant to the  
Church of England Evangelical Council  
January 2021



# Chapter 1

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## An introduction to *Living in Love and Faith*

This chapter will consider the following aspects of *Living in Love and Faith*:

- Background
- How it was produced
- Contents
- Purpose
- Next steps

### **Background**

The long term background to LLF is the debate about the morality of same-sex sexual relationships which has taken place in the Church of England ever since Derek Sherwin Bailey first published his article 'The problem of sexual inversion' in 1952.<sup>1</sup> *Living in Love and Faith* is the latest contribution to this long-standing debate – which has now grown to be a much bigger debate about marriage, about the Christian understanding of anthropology, and about sexuality in general, and includes the issues of transgender and intersex as well as same-sex sexual relationships.

The immediate background to *LLF* was the decision by the Church of England's General Synod on 15 February 2017 not to 'take note' of (in other words, approve) the House

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1. D S Bailey, 'The Problem of Sexual Inversion,' *Theology*, vol LV, February 1952, 47–52.

of Bishops' report, 'Marriage and Same-Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations' (GS 2055).<sup>2</sup> These 'shared conversations' were the 'Shared Conversations on Scripture, Mission and Human Sexuality' which took place in the Church of England from 2014 to 2016 as a response to the 2013 'Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality'.<sup>3</sup> The 2017 report from the House of Bishops proposed a way forward for the Church of England after these conversations. The General Synod's rejection of it meant that an alternative way forward had to be found.

This alternative way forward was set out in a letter from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to the members of Synod, which was published the day after the Synod vote. The letter said, among other things, that the House of Bishops would produce 'a large-scale teaching document around the subject of human sexuality'.<sup>4</sup> The Archbishops noted that this would ultimately be an episcopal document:

In an episcopal church a principal responsibility of bishops is the teaching ministry of the church, and the guarding of the deposit of faith that we have all inherited. The teaching document must thus ultimately come from the bishops.<sup>5</sup>

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2. The House of Bishops, GS 2055, 'Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations', November 2016, text at <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/229P-GS2055.pdf>, accessed 19 February 2021.

3. Known as the 'Pilling' report after the working group's chair, Sir Joseph Pilling. 'Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality' (London: Church House Publishing, 2013).

4. The full text of the Archbishops' letter can be found at: 'Archbishops of Canterbury and York issue letter after Synod vote', <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2017/02/archbishops-of-canterbury-and-york-issue-letter-after-synod-vote.aspx>, 17 February 2017, accessed 19 February 2021.

5. 'Archbishops of Canterbury and York issue letter'.



The document would need to be properly inclusive, not only in terms of its subject matter, but also in terms of those involved in its production:

...all episcopal ministry must be exercised with all the people of God, lay and ordained, and thus our proposals will ensure a wide-ranging and fully inclusive approach, both in subject matter and in those who work on it.<sup>6</sup>

A group chaired by the Bishop of Coventry, Dr Christopher Cocksworth, with Dr Eeva John as its ‘enabling officer’, was established to produce this teaching document. LLF is the result of the process that followed.

## **How it was produced**

To try to ensure inclusivity, LLF was produced by a team of forty-nine invited participants. This group comprised men and women, lay and ordained, with a range of expertise and a wide range of views on the matters under discussion.<sup>7</sup> They worked in four Study Groups (Bible, Doctrine and Ethics, History, and Science) – each chaired by a diocesan bishop. The work of these groups was overseen by a Co-ordinating Group of bishops and consultants which was chaired by the Bishop of Coventry, supported by Dr John.

The four Study Groups produced a large number of papers which were drawn on from 2019 onwards to produce the final LLF material. This final material was the result of

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6. ‘Archbishops of Canterbury and York issue letter’.

7. The list of participants can be found at ‘Living in Love and Faith group members’ at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/living-love-and-faith-group-members>, accessed 19 February 2021.

numerous drafts and re-drafts in light of comments received from bishops, General Synod members, and others invited to review the developing material. The original intention was to publish in time for the Lambeth Conference (scheduled for July 2020), but final publication was delayed until November 2020 because of the postponement of the Lambeth Conference, and the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. Whatever we think of the LLF material, it is important to acknowledge the enormous amount of work put into it by the Bishop of Coventry, Dr John, and everyone else who took part.

## Contents

The LLF material is a suite of resources for ‘Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage’.<sup>8</sup> It has been likened to a tree and its branches. The trunk of the tree – the central and most important resource – is the 480–page book, *Living in Love and Faith*. It is accompanied by:

- **16 podcasts** (30–40 minutes in length) which are edited conversations between people involved in the LLF process.
- **17 films** (five minutes each) in which individuals, couples and families describe their own experiences of issues raised by LLF.
- **A study course** (five sessions, available online or as a printed booklet) which looks in turn at: what it means

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8. *Living in Love and Faith*, Home, at <https://llf.churchofengland.org/?redirect=0>, accessed 19 February 2021.

to learn together as followers of Jesus Christ; how our identity in Christ relates to sex and gender; the kind of relationships to which God calls us; where our bodies and sex fit into this; and how diversity and difference affect our life together as a church.

- **An extensive library** of additional resources covering: the Bible; social and biological sciences; theology and ethics; and history, philosophy and law. The library contains 323 items, including background papers produced for the LLF process and details of books or papers published elsewhere. According to the Library's Guidance Notes: 'Items have been included in the LLF library on the basis of their usefulness in communicating the findings of research, the views of scholars, and the lived experiences of Christians and others. Every effort has been made to include publications from diverse viewpoints and differing disciplinary perspectives.'<sup>9</sup>

## Purpose

The purpose of the material is explained by the bishops in the Invitation at the start of the LLF book, and in the Appeal at its end:

This book has come about because there is disagreement within the people of God, including among us, the Bishops of the Church of England. There are disagreements about same-sex relationships and the Christian understanding of

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9. LLF Library Guidance Notes at <https://llf.churchofengland.org/course/view.php?id=17>, accessed 19 February 2021 (registration required).

marriage as the Church of England has received it. There are also disagreements about pastoral practice in relation to gender identity, sexuality and relationships more generally. The roots of these disagreements relate to Scripture, doctrine, ethics and the nature of the Church, including the Church of England.<sup>10</sup>

In the face of these differences, their hope is that:

...engaging with the book will deepen our sense of being a church that is a learning community – or a community of learning communities. We hope that the book will draw together people with different views and experiences, so that we do our learning in the unity of the body of the church, not in factions or silos. We hope that we will hold each other's pain as we touch on matters that are deeply personal. We hope that we will honour each other as beloved disciples of Christ. We hope that together we will be led to deeper understanding from Scripture and the church's tradition. We hope that we will be enlightened by exploring new areas of knowledge. We hope that we will be transformed into greater Christlikeness by our attentiveness to and involvement with each other and the communities we serve. We dare to hope that as together we study this book and its accompanying resources we will become a church that has good news to bring to society on matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.<sup>11</sup>

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10. *Living in Love and Faith*, 3.

11. *Living in Love and Faith*, 3.

In their closing ‘appeal’, the bishops again highlight the disagreements that exist in the church:<sup>12</sup>

We do not agree on a number of matters relating to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. Some of those differences of view relate to the ethics and lifestyle of opposite sex relationships and some relate to questions around gender and pastoral provisions for transgender people.

The most pressing of these disagreements, they write, concern ‘questions around same-sex relationships, and we recognize that here decisions in several interconnected areas need to be made with some urgency.’<sup>13</sup>

In this situation, the purpose of the LLF material is to provide the Church of England with resources for learning and discernment, so that godly decisions can eventually be made:

It remains clear that all of us – bishops included – need to go on learning from each other and from all who seek the way of truth. That is the purpose of the *Living in Love and Faith* learning resources – to help us to learn and discern together so that right judgements and godly decisions can be made about our common life.<sup>14</sup>

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12. *Living in Love and Faith*, 422.

13. *Living in Love and Faith*, 422.

14. *Living in Love and Faith*, 422.

## Next steps

What will happen after LLF? According to the statement about LLF issued by the Church of England on 9 November 2020, three things will now happen:

First, a period of ‘church-wide learning and engagement’ will take place during 2021.

Secondly, parallel to this, ‘A group of bishops, chaired by the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, will lead the process of discernment and decision-making about a way forward for the church in relation to human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.’

Thirdly, the House of Bishops will bring ‘the discernment and decision-making to a timely conclusion in 2022’ and the bishops will then bring a proposal for the way forward for the Church of England to the General Synod.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, there will be a limited period of further conversation and ‘engagement’, overseen by bishops, leading eventually to decisions being made in General Synod. This is confirmed by the more detailed statement of the purpose of the Bishop of London’s group of bishops. This body (the ‘Next Steps Group’) is to:

- Encourage participation in using the LLF learning resources as widely as possible

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15. The Church of England, ‘*Living in Love and Faith* resources published as bishops issue appeal to Church to “listen and learn together”’ at <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/living-love-and-faith-resources-published-bishops-issue-appeal>, accessed 19 February 2021.

- Listen attentively to what is emerging from the learning across the dioceses
- Explore possibilities for our life together as a Church
- Plan into the future as discernment leads to decision-making in 2022<sup>16</sup>

In line with these bullet points, one of the five responsibilities of the Next Steps Group as set out in its Terms of Reference is to enter ‘a substantive period of church-wide engagement with the resources’ and then to ‘draw up scenarios for different outcomes and consider the ecclesial implications’ and to ‘consider and bring forward to the House [of Bishops] proposals for consideration of any motions or other business that should go to the General Synod’ – aiming to complete this process ‘by the end of 2022 at the latest’.<sup>17</sup>

The important point to note is that LLF, though designed as a means of encouraging further respectful conversation, is also meant to enable godly decisions to be made in the very near future – issues which it is recognized need to be resolved ‘with some urgency’.

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16. ‘*Living in Love and Faith* next steps’ at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/living-love-and-faith-next-steps>, accessed 19 February 2021. The following bishops are members of this group: London, Fulham, Grantham, Winchester, Loughborough, Sherborne, Ripon, Warrington, Truro, Bradwell, Maidstone and Norwich.

17. ‘The LLF Next Steps Group: Terms of Reference’ at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/LLF%20Next%20Steps%20Group%20ToR.pdf>, accessed 19 February 2021. There is an online form on the Church of England website which will allow people to contact the Next Steps Group directly. This can be found at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/contact-living-love-and-faith-next-steps-group>, accessed 19 February 2021.





# Chapter 2

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## A summary of *Living in Love and Faith*

This chapter walks through the whole *Living in Love and Faith* book, outlining its structure and summarizing the contents of each section.<sup>1</sup> The LLF book has eight sections: Foreword, An Invitation, five main sections (Parts One to Five) and An Appeal. NB All page numbers within the main text of this chapter relate to the LLF book.

### Structure

The LLF book, described as the ‘trunk’ of the tree, opens with a **Foreword** from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.

This is followed by **An Invitation** to the book and its accompanying resources from the Bishops of the Church of England.

The bulk of the book is divided into five parts:

- Part One – Reflecting: What have we received?
- Part Two – Paying attention: What is going on?
- Part Three – Making connections: Where are we in God’s story?

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1. Church of England, *Living in Love and Faith* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>, accessed 19 February 2021.

- Part Four – Seeking answers: How do we hear God?
- Part Five – Conversing: What can we learn from each other?

Between each of these main parts is a series of what are called **Encounters**. These are brief snapshots of the lives of twenty individuals and congregations from across the Church of England who shared their experiences with the LLF group.

Then comes **An Appeal** from the Bishops, inviting members of the Church of England to join in the process of discernment which will follow the publication of the LLF materials.

The book finishes with a glossary explaining the meaning of key terms used within it, endnotes, an index of biblical references and a general index.

We will look at each of its main elements in turn, with a summary of each.

## **Foreword**

The Archbishops explain in their Foreword:

We seek to understand the mind of God revealed in Scripture, our final authority in which we find all things necessary for salvation. We listen to the Church present and past and universal. We use our reason and understanding, drawing on the best thinking of the natural and human sciences. In that process of threefold listening we commit to learning, from God

and through each other, in the spirit and light of that perfect love. (p vii)

They go on to acknowledge the damage and hurt that has been caused by the church's discussion of sexual identity and behaviour, and apologize for their own contribution to this:

As soon as we begin to consider questions of sexual identity and behaviour, we need to acknowledge the huge damage and hurt that has been caused where talk of truth, holiness and discipleship has been wielded harshly and not ministered as a healing balm. Especially amongst LGBTQI+ people, every word we use – quite possibly including these in this very Foreword, despite all the care we exercise – may cause pain. We have caused, and continue to cause, hurt and unnecessary suffering. For such acts, each of us, and the Church collectively, should be deeply ashamed and repentant. As archbishops, we are personally very sorry where we have contributed to this. (p viii)

The cause of the church's failure in this area, they say, has been a lack of love:

At the heart of our failure is the absence of a genuine love for those whom God loves in Christ, knowing as God does every aspect of all of our lives. Such lack of perfect love causes us at times to fear and act out of fear. Defensiveness is felt, and aggression is experienced, both by those who long for change and by those who believe, sincerely, that change would be wrong and damaging. (pp viii-ix)

Because of this previous history:

...many people will read this work with trepidation. They will be anxious in case it causes them more pain or betrays, or seems to them to betray, principles they hold as essential. You will hear testimonies of spiritual growth from people whose convictions and lived experiences seem incompatible. God seems to be present in these opposing circumstances and people of divergent convictions. (p ix)

Furthermore, the book will make ‘uncomfortable reading’ for all who read it ‘sincerely and honestly.’ This is because:

It will bring you face to face, as it has us, with Christian people who have been hurt or harmed by the words and actions of the church. It will confront each of us with the realities of the depth and breadth of disagreement that is the experience of all churches, including our own, today. It will remind us of the depth of commitment to holiness that the gospel and the cross call us to, and how short all of us fall from it. We must not pretend otherwise. Only in looking honestly at the fact that we have sisters and brothers in Christ who have vehemently opposed views to ours, can we come in humility before God and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (pp ix-x)

Looking forward, the archbishops declare that the vision which the church must seek to attain is the kind of unity referred to by Jesus in John 17:21:

Our vision must be that which Jesus prays for in John 17.21, ‘that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in

me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' Being one is not in the sense of being the same, but being one in love and obedience and holiness, so that the world may find the knowledge of Christ as Saviour and the peace of God in the experience of God's Kingdom. There will probably never be a time when we all agree exactly what that looks like, but our prayer for the Church through this work is that collectively we demonstrate the same love to one another that we have experienced from God; the grace that includes everyone whom Jesus Christ is calling to follow him; the holiness that changes the world and the unity that calls others to faith in Christ. The gift of that kind of love for God, for each other, and even for those who oppose us, is, in the words of 1 Peter, a love that covers a multitude of sins and thus leads us to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 4.8 and 1.16). (p x)

## **An Invitation**

In their 'Invitation' which follows, the bishops refer to the account of the feeding of the five thousand in John 6 and explain that the LLF book and accompanying resources are an invitation to those in the Church of England to be likewise nourished by Christ:

...the book and its accompanying resources invite us all to sit down together with each other, and, like the crowds, to be nourished by Christ. It is an invitation made in faith: that God will provide the nourishment that we need to better understand God's purposes in relation to human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. It is an invitation that carries with it the

power of God's love: the love of the one who created us and cares for us in the seemingly impossible dilemmas we face as a church with regard to our different perspectives on these matters. (p 2)

They acknowledge that people may not be able to see the sense in sitting down in this way, and yet, they say:

...this book is an invitation to do just that: to sit down to learn, listen and pray together. This is neither easy nor comfortable and is itself a step of love and faith. When Jesus ordered the disciples to make the crowd sit down, they had no hard evidence that everyone would be fed. In fact, quite the contrary. In the same way, this book offers no recommendations or guarantees of an agreed way forward for the church in relation to human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. But it does challenge all of us to believe that God is at work among us as we sit together to learn, to study, to listen, to talk and to receive; and, in so doing, to follow Christ together in his way, truth and life. (p 3)

The bishops then declare that this invitation is issued in the hope that:

...engaging with the book will deepen our sense of being a church that is a learning community – or a community of learning communities. We hope that the book will draw together people with different views and experiences, so that we do our learning in the unity of the body of the church, not in factions or silos.

...we will be led to deeper understanding from Scripture and the church's tradition ... [and] enlightened by exploring new areas of knowledge.

...as together we study this book and its accompanying resources we will become a church that has good news to bring to society on matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. (p 3)

Having said what they hope for, the bishops then declare that the Church is 'not always good at living in love and faith or being a beacon of God's love in the world.' (p 4) Many in the Church of England, they say, do not experience it:

...as a welcoming and safe environment where the fullness of the love of Christ is manifest. Many of us in our church communities have not always experienced the unconditional love of Christ. Indeed, some have experienced outright rejection, homophobia, transphobia or other unacceptable patterns of behaviour. Some have experienced hostility, scorn and demeaning accusations because of their convictions. Some have been subjected to sexual abuse. (p 4)

This being the case:

As we gather to sit and learn together, we need to do our part in creating safe spaces where we can relate honestly, graciously and lovingly to one another. This will involve admitting and addressing the realities of our past failures if we are to hear God in and through our study and prayer. It will involve repenting of the ways in which our attitudes and behaviours cause these sins, rooted as they are in fear. (p 4)

In order to achieve this goal, the bishops recommend the application of the Church of England's 'Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together', which are 'to address ignorance ... to acknowledge prejudice ... to admit hypocrisy ... to cast out fear .... to speak into silence ... [and] to pay attention to power.' (pp 4–5)

The bishops end their invitation by explaining the purpose of the LLF book:

This book is trying to create a space for us all to rediscover the compassionate, self-giving and abundant love of Christ in and among us as we learn together. It is about being led deeper into the truth about the God we encounter in Scripture: the God who has spoken in love to our broken world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; the God who, in renewing all things (Matthew 19:28), is calling us to the hope in which we were saved, a hope for what we do not yet see, but wait for with patience. It is about proclaiming the kingdom of God and making Christ known in the world he came by grace to save and bring to fulness of life. (p 6)

## **Part One – Reflecting: What have we received?**

Part One (Chapters 1–4) of LLF sets the debate in a particular context: 'The purpose of Part One is to set our questions about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage in the context of God's gift of life.' (p 10). Each of the chapters in Part One considers a different 'gift' and I will summarize the message of each chapter in turn.



## **Chapter 1: The gift of life**

This chapter 'invites us to wonder at the gift of abundant, eternal life that is offered to us through the redemptive life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' (p 10). It declares that:

...the gift that God gives to all creation is life. It is a gift generated in each of us as we are brought to birth and live out our lives. It is a gift that Christ came to raise into a fulness of life that continues beyond death. This gift of life that is for everyone and is without limit can only be fully known together – together with God and each other, together in families and communities, together in relationships, friendships and marriages, together in the life of Jesus' body, the Church. For the life that God gives is life together. (p 15)

## **Chapter 2: The gift of life in relationship**

This chapter:

...shows us that this gift of life is a gift of relationship. It explores some of the characteristics of our relationships that flow from God's gift of life, a gift renewed through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ and made known in the community of love formed around him. (p 10)

The chapter notes that there are a range of different forms of relationship alongside marriage. It stresses the particular importance of friendship as a 'form of togetherness' that 'underlies the sorts of life-bringing relationships we are describing here' (p 18) and that was manifested in the life of Jesus. The chapter goes on to observe that there are people who follow the example of Jesus by remaining single; it

comments that others are single through circumstance and without a sense that this is God's call to them, and when the church fails 'to provide the sort of mutuality and way of fruitfulness they yearn for' then, 'Their loss is real and painful.' (p 21)

The chapter finishes by explaining that:

Some Christians find themselves drawn into relationships of deep love for another person of the same sex. They find that these relationships bring them life-giving gifts of knowing and being known by another person, but that they are not affirmed and celebrated by the church. Sometimes those relationships have been sealed through the commitment of vows recognized by state and society as marriage, but not embraced by the church's teaching and practice of marriage described in the following chapter. Their loss is also real and painful. (p 22)

### **Chapter 3: The gift of marriage**

This chapter 'explains the biblical and historical roots of the church's understanding of marriage as a lifelong, faithful relationship between one man and one woman' (p 10). It notes that Jesus traced marriage back to God's creative activity and saw it as a lifelong relationship between one man and one woman. It then goes on to explore mutuality and fruitfulness as key elements of marriage and looks at how the Bible sees the relationship of husband and wife as a sign of 'God's relation with the world' (p 32). The chapter then looks at the place of sex within marriage and the fact that the marital bond can be broken and that divorce can be the result. It concludes by declaring:

When received well and cherished, nourished and nurtured, supported by others and sustained by God's other means of grace in the life of the church, the gift of marriage brings life with fulness and gives life with abundance. (p 37)

#### **Chapter 4: The gift of learning**

This chapter draws Part One to an end with an explanation of:

...how, in the rest of the book, we will go about learning together – being taught together by Christ – about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. It explains the rationale for engaging with the Bible, the church's tradition, history and the sciences in the search for truth. It explores how and why we also need to be good observers of the world in which God has placed us, and of the lived experiences which call us to understand God's presence in human experience. (p 10)

#### **Encounters**

The Encounters section features conversations about welcoming people into the church, the danger of churches putting marriage on a pedestal, and the danger of making the LGBTQI+ issue 'special'. It also features the experiences of someone who has faced domestic abuse, poverty, and the conviction and imprisonment of her husband; and the experience of a Christian bisexual.

#### **Part Two – Paying attention: What is going on?**

The purpose of Part Two (Chapters 5–7) of LLF 'is to take a careful look at what is happening in the world around us with regard to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.

We describe, as dispassionately as possible, what is going on in God's world with its mix of goodness and fallenness, of glory and human weakness' (p 60). The three chapters consider society, science and religion.

### **Chapter 5: Society**

This chapter is in three sections:

- The first section is about the changing patterns of relationships in contemporary British society. It looks in turn at: singleness; marriage, relationships and fulfilment; marriage, procreation and the well-being of children; friendship and loneliness.
- The second section is about sexual activity. It looks in turn at sex and fulfilment; the commodification of sex; freedom and consent; pornography; domestic abuse; and child sexual abuse.
- The third section is about identity and self-understanding. It looks in turn at sexual orientation; gender identity; and the relationship between gender and sex. It also includes a brief history of transgender identity and statistics relating to the number of trans people in this country. The section finishes with a timeline of the 'changes to law and policy' (p 98) in relation to same-sex relationships and transgender between 1967 and 2019. It notes that 'although LGBTQI+ people are now free from fear of prosecution, there is a long way to go before they are free of fear from harassment' (p 101).

## **Chapter 6: Science**

This chapter begins by exploring the complexity and difficulty surrounding the scientific study of sexuality and gender. It then looks in turn at what we can learn from science about sexual orientation, gender identity and ‘variations in sexual characteristics’ (p 112) also known as ‘intersex’. The final section considers what science has to teach us about sex and well-being; sexual orientation and gender identity as medical diagnoses; the relationship between the mental health of LGBTQI+ people and social stigma; efforts to change people’s sexual orientation and gender identity; and the nature of gender transition procedures.

## **Chapter 7: Religion**

This chapter begins by looking at developments with regard to LGBTQI+ issues in the Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim communities – with a brief note about the recent controversy regarding relationship and sex-education in schools. It then looks at the range of different responses to the acceptance of same-sex relationships in other Christian churches; the changing relationship between the Church of England and wider society; and recent developments in the Church of England’s official teaching with regard to marriage and divorce, heterosexual civil partnerships, same-sex relationships and trans people. The chapter concludes by tracing developments in the Anglican Communion with regard to marriage, sexual ethics and same-sex relationships.

## **Encounters**

The Encounters section contains the thoughts of five sixth-form students from a Church of England Academy about the difficulties experienced by those who don’t conform

to societal norms for gender; the stories of someone who is asexual and his mother; the thoughts of a Christian with a Christian mother and Muslim father about sex before marriage and homosexuality; and an interview with someone who describes herself as bi-gender.

### **Part Three – Making Connections: where are we in God’s story?**

The purpose of Part Three (Chapters 8–12) of LLF ‘is to explore current Christian thinking and discussions about human identity, sexuality, and marriage. In the light of the good news of Jesus Christ, how do Christians understand and respond to the trends we observed in Part Two?’ (p 164). The five chapters look at five different ‘stories’.

#### **Chapter 8: A story of love and faith with hope**

This chapter begins by explaining that ‘love is the reason for creation; and sharing love with God is the reason for the creation of human beings.’ (p 171). Human love:

...in all its richness and glory, reflects this prior love of God. Acts of self-giving for the good of the other – gifts of time, attention, nurture and care, the tender touch of lovers, the enduring commitment of friends – are luminous with God’s light. If we love one another, God lives in us. (p 171)

The chapter then explains how faith relates to love, declaring:

Faith is the trust that love is true, that it is indeed at the heart of all things and that it will prevail. Christian faith is trust in Jesus – trust that Jesus truly is fully

God and fully human, that he truly does represent everything of God to us and everything of us to God. Faith is trusting that the commandments Jesus gives are the way of life and truth. Faith is trusting that when we stray from God's way of life, Christ's death truly brings about the forgiveness of sins and his resurrection truly is the end of death. Faith is trust in the Holy Spirit to do what we cannot do for ourselves: make Christ present to us until the last day. (p 173)

Finally, the chapter looks at hope, defining it as 'the trust that love will finally prevail'. Hope, it says, 'is the orientation of one's life towards the faith that love alone will abide forever' (p 173).

### **Chapter 9: A story that embraces all life**

This chapter explores what the Bible has to say about the theological significance of the human body, relationships, family life, and the relationship between sex and power. The chapter cautions that the Bible:

...often tells the story from the point of view of those who had the power to tell the story. We know less of the lives and perspectives of women, of those with little power. There is also no explicit positive or negative narrative portrayal of same-sex relationships nor of trans people. The few verses that do speak about same-sex matters are all found either in legal material or in lists of sins in Paul's letters, and so the narratives do not enable us to see how the lives of those involved actually played out. People, especially women, who were attracted to those of the same sex and may have been in some sort of relationship are invisible in Scripture, and we know very little of

their life of faith in the history of Israel and the Early Church. That has opened the way, as we will see in Part Four, to all kinds of arguments about the lived realities to which those texts might apply. (p 186)

Nevertheless, it maintains that Scripture does show us:

...people struggling, and failing, and learning, and trying again to live the story of salvation in the midst of the complexity of real lives. It shows us that story played out in people's bodily experience and activity, in their relationships in all their variety and complexity, in the order and struggles of their family lives, and in the tangles of sex and power and vulnerability. When we ask, in the present, how the story of salvation enables us to respond to questions about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, we are pursuing a task bequeathed to us by Scripture. (p 186)

### **Chapter 10: A story about being human**

This chapter looks at what the Christian faith has to say about human dignity, human diversity, human identity, and human sinfulness (which it looks at under the heading of 'dying and rising'). In the course of its exploration of these topics, it also considers the experience of women in marriage and what it means to say that something is 'natural' or 'unnatural'.

In its conclusion, the chapter lists four 'key claims' on which, 'we hope Christians across the Church of England can agree.' (p 216) These four claims are that:



- Every human person, regardless of their gender, sexuality, or relationship status, is created in the image of God. Each and every human being comes from God, and is the object of God's care and love.
- God has created human beings to be wonderfully diverse. Their diversity is part of God's gift of life to the world and is to be celebrated and affirmed.
- Our deepest identity is our identity in Christ, and every aspect of our existence is caught up in that story, including everything that goes into our gender and sexuality, and all our relationships.
- For each of us, the discovery of our identity in Christ will involve challenge and transformation, the conviction of sin and repentance, including in relation to our attitudes and behaviour in the areas of gender, sexuality and relationships. (pp 216–17)

The conclusion of the chapter explains that:

The church's disagreements about gender and sexuality, in particular, are disagreements between people who can share all these affirmations. They are not disagreements between those who are and those who are not convinced that their deepest identity is in Christ; or between those who take sin and the need for transformation seriously and those who do not; or those who affirm the equal dignity of all human beings and those who do not; or those who celebrate human diversity and those who do not. The disagreements are more specific than that: they are between different understandings of

how human dignity can best be affirmed and what Christian discipleship and transformation demand. These disagreements reflect different understandings of how certain aspects of human experience fit within the Christian story. In particular, we have seen that there are deep disagreements about whether certain aspects of human experience, in the areas of gender and sexuality, are to be viewed as reflecting the goodness and God-given diversity of humans as created in God's image, or as marks of the brokenness of that created image which God is working to restore. (p 217)

### **Chapter 11: A story about being Church**

This chapter looks at the three topics relating to the church: the holiness of the church; inclusion and exclusion (using what the Bible says about the relationship between Israel and the Moabites as an example); and the relationship between disagreement and communion. On the third of these topics the chapter identifies 'three broad types of disagreement' as follows:

First, there are disagreements in which each group believes the other to be advocating something simply incompatible with the good news of Jesus. They think the other group is teaching something that amounts to a rejection of Jesus' call on one's life. Some will say that the people involved are no longer serious about living as Jesus' disciples, and that they cannot be considered Christians in any meaningful sense. Others will say that the people involved might still be Christians, but that their teaching is not – and perhaps that they are putting their own and others' eternal salvation at risk.

Second, there are disagreements that don't cut right to the heart of our understanding of the gospel in this way, but that do undermine our ability to live and work together as one church. They make it hard to worship together, to share sacraments, to have a single structure of ministry, oversight and governance. A lot of ecumenical disagreements take this form. We recognize one another's communities as Christian churches, teaching the gospel, but we disagree about matters that impair our ability to live and work together as one church.

Third, there are disagreements that don't make us think that those who disagree with us are rejecting the gospel, and that don't prevent us working together as one church, even though we do think them wrong about something that matters. (p 231)

It then notes that one of the issues in the current debate in the Church of England about 'sexuality, gender identity, relationships and marriage' is a disagreement about which of these categories should apply to these particular disagreements.

The chapter's conclusion is that:

The Church is called to be holy. It is called to be a community that expresses God's lavish love to the world. It is called to be a community where everyone is welcome, and from which no one is made to feel excluded simply because of who they are. It is called to be a community that welcomes the poor, the marginalized, the excluded and the deprecated. It is called to be a community in which all people

are welcomed into a distinctive form of life, which embodies and communicates God's distinctive character, God's life, God's glory. And so it is called to be a community in which people are enabled to recognize their sin, repent, and receive forgiveness.

The question still remains, however, in our discussion of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage: Which patterns of life are consistent, and which inconsistent, with God's holiness?' (p 234)

### **Chapter 12: A story about ways of human loving**

This chapter focuses on 'specific patterns of living' (p 235). It begins by looking at how holy living necessarily involves self-denial or self-discipline. It then looks at celibacy and marriage as two patterns of life that Christians believe exemplify the call to self-denial and self-discipline. The chapter finishes by asking what sex is for, and what kinds of self-discipline or self-denial are called for in sexual relationships. In the course of looking at these three main topics, the chapter also looks at the topics of celibacy and eschatology, the biblical teaching about covenant relationships, Jesus' teaching about marriage and adultery, chastity, and the significance of the Song of Solomon for our understanding of love and marriage.

The chapter concludes:

This pattern of self-denial for the sake of abundant life is a characteristic shape of life lived within the story of love and faith. We have seen something of how it can play out in the celibate vocations that some Christians experience. We have seen it in the vows of faithfulness that are made in marriage. We

have seen it in the mutuality, consent and faithfulness called for in sexual relationships.

We have also, once again, encountered Christian disagreements, especially in relation to the patterns of discipline appropriate for lesbian and gay people. Those are not disagreements about whether discipleship is costly, or whether it calls for the sometimes difficult reordering of our desires. They are not disagreements about whether Christians are called to self-denial and restraint. They are disagreements about the specific disciplines we are called to and about the ways in which those disciplines work for people in different situations. (p 258)

### **Encounters**

The Encounters section contains the stories of a male Christian who is gay and celibate; a female Christian who is in a lesbian civil partnership where there are two children born with the help of gay sperm donor; a vicar who was married with children but now has a same-sex partner; and a Christian from an East Asian background who has held to a traditional view of sex and marriage but whose daughter finds non-acceptance of gay people the thing that most puts her off church.

## **Part Four – Seeking answers: how do we hear God?**

The purpose of Part Four (Chapters 13–18) of LLF is:

...to consider how we go about seeking and finding answers to the question, what does it mean for us as individuals and as a church to be Christlike when it comes to matters of identity, sexuality, relationships

and marriage? And how is it that we reach different conclusions from one another about these things when we are all seeking to follow Jesus?’ (p 268)

The five chapters address the question ‘How do we hear God?’ by looking at the following topics: the Bible; church; creation; cultural context; experience and conscience; and prayer and guidance.

### **Chapter 13: The Bible**

This chapter starts by looking at how the Bible, believed by Anglicans to be written by human writers, but also inspired by God, is understood to have two key purposes: ‘the first is to tell us the good news of God’s saving love, and the second is to call the whole world into holiness’ (p 275). It then goes on to note that biblical texts have to be read in their textual, historical and canonical contexts, and that one cause of the disagreements concerning the Bible’s teaching regarding same-sex relationships has to do with the different ways people understand the biblical material in its historical and canonical contexts.

The chapter then goes on to consider the different ways of interpreting those biblical texts that have traditionally been seen as prohibiting same-sex relationships, devoting twelve pages (pp 283–94) to the following passages: Genesis 19 (together with Judges 19); Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; and 1 Timothy 1:8–11.

After that, it presents seven imaginary panellists who are asked to summarize their different ways of understanding the Bible’s unity and authority. Panellist 1 believes that the Bible is ‘without error, truthful and clear’ while, at the other end of the spectrum, Panellist 7 sees the Bible as

a 'collection of fallible human voices' (pp 295–97). There follows an evaluation of these seven perspectives, especially in the light of official Anglican teaching about the Bible, which offers the softly-spoken judgement that the positions taken by panellists 1 and 7 are 'beyond the mainstream of the church's conversation about the Bible's authority and purpose' (p 298), while not saying that these positions are actually mistaken.

In addition to these main topics, the chapter looks at different ways of understanding what the Bible, viewed as a whole, tells us about marriage and what Paul has to say in Romans about handling disagreement in the church.

The conclusion drawn by the chapter is that there are 'multiple forms of disagreement' (p 308) about the Bible, which involve both disagreement about how to understand the biblical texts in their historical context, and disagreement about the nature of biblical authority. We return to this in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this book.

### **Chapter 14: Church**

This chapter is in two main parts.

The first part ('Listening to the tradition') looks at various forms of the church's tradition that are recognized as carrying authority and that shape our reading of the Bible: the rule of faith, the Creeds, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Articles of Religion. It also looks at the church's role in the formation of the biblical canon and the role of bishops in upholding the church's tradition.

The second part ('Listening to and as the whole body') looks at the whole church, national and worldwide, and its need to

take counsel together to discern the will of God. It takes Acts 15 as a paradigmatic example of the church taking counsel together in this way. It also notes the importance of having regard to issues of power and inclusion as well as listening to the voices of marginalized groups of people.

The chapter concludes that ‘Listening to the voice of God is a task for the whole Church’ (p 329) and that:

To attend to the “mind” of the church’ means reading the Bible together in the light of the creeds and the history of authoritative teachings from the Christian past. It means reading while alert to the challenges that our ongoing reading might present to those teachings. It means reading in the midst of worship, which directs our hearts and minds to the love of God, and shapes our imagination of the whole Christian story. It means listening to one another – to the whole community of Christ’s people down the centuries and across the world today, including those often excluded from the conversations of the Church. It means reflecting on the questions about how we identify amongst them those voices that carry particular weight in conveying to us Christ’s guidance to his people. The more we hear of his voice, the deeper we can be drawn into the abundant life of love and faith that God has for us. (p 330)

### **Chapter 15: Creation**

This chapter begins by noting that God speaks to us through the created world, but that the created world has been distorted by sin. It goes on to say that we need to listen to science in order to learn more about the world that God has made and to look at the arguments put forward for affirming



the theological importance of natural knowledge as well as those put forward for questioning it.

The conclusion reached is that:

In our debates about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, we encounter a complex mix of appeals to science, to scriptural depictions of the natural world, to conventional wisdom, and to Christ's radical revision of what we might deem natural. There is no quick route to sorting out the differing pressures and possibilities here, nor to ordering and reconciling all these claims. There is no shortcut: listening for the voice of God demands a careful, self-critical and ongoing conversation between our faith and our knowledge of the created world. This kind of conversation is, nevertheless, unavoidable for those who believe that God made us, and that God calls us in Jesus to the redemption and fulfilment of our creaturely and sin-marred lives. (p 340)

### **Chapter 16: Cultural Context**

This chapter is concerned with Christian engagement with the surrounding culture. It declares that:

Listening to the voice of God involves an ongoing process of discernment, in which we learn to recognize what in the Church and what in the wider world resonates with God's Word spoken in Jesus, and what muffles and distorts it.

In the process of that discernment, we need to attend to the way in which Christians in other contexts have learnt to respond to that Word – and to the

ways in which they can enable us to hear that Word differently.

We also need to learn to recognize some of the places in which we have been mistaking our own voices for the voice of God. One way we can do this, and discover more of what God's Word means, is by attending to the questions, challenges and possibilities of the cultures that surround us. There is no recipe for how we do this, no shortcut to discovery.

There is no alternative but to listen hard to the people all around us, and to read and reread the sources of Christian faith in the light of the questions they ask, the criticisms they make, and the possibilities they present. (pp 351–352)

As an example of Christian engagement with culture, the chapter looks at the development of Anglican thinking with regard to polygamy in Africa. While a commitment to a monogamous understanding of marriage remained in place, a 'less strict pastoral discipline' with regard to polygamy emerged:

...as a result of listening to those who knew the cultural context and the impact of current practice on the church's mission and who believed that God was calling the Communion to change its traditional stricter disciplines in relation to the pattern of married life required of those receiving baptism or confirmation. (p 347)

## **Chapter 17: Experience and conscience**

This chapter looks at how our understanding of who we are and God's will for us is shaped by our convictions and our experiences. It declares that 'everyone involved in the church's deliberations and debates is shaped by their experience' in regard to 'the questions we think most important, the methods we think most appropriate, the places we look for understanding, and so on' (p 354). It goes on to say that our convictions, 'however deeply rooted and closely woven or however compellingly experienced, are always fallible. As with any claims to hear God, they require processes of testing and discernment as they are related to all the other ways we have of listening for God's voice' (p 356). With regard to conscience it says that, while our consciences are not infallible, we are called to:

...take care with each other's consciences. As Paul shows us in 1 Corinthians 8.7–12, it is important to recognize when people's arguments and decisions are rooted in their consciences. It is important to be aware of when we are pushing someone to act in a way that runs against their conscience – and of the impact that will have on their experience of God's saving work. (p 358)

The chapter also notes what was said about conscience in *Issues in Human Sexuality* and the continuing disagreement about whether what was said in this report was correct or not (pp 358–359).<sup>2</sup>

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2. The House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991).

Finally, the chapter cautions against both over- and under-estimating the importance of people's accounts of their 'convictions about their identities and relationships' (p 361). These reports, it argues are 'windows into the convictions of others' and, as such, they:

...pose a series of important questions for those seeking to listen for God's voice:

- Can I imaginatively grasp the shape of this speaker's conviction – wearing their experiential shoes, at least for a moment?
- Can I imagine what it would mean to read the Bible and interpret the tradition from within that experience?
- Does imagining this then alert me to previously unseen ways in which my own approach is underpinned by my own experience or sense of identity?
- Does any of this help me to understand in new ways what is at stake between me and them?
- What would it mean to pursue the serious questions of testing and discernment in a way that did real justice to this person's self-understanding?
- How does the community of faith play a role in helping me to hear God's voice?' (p 362)

## **Chapter 18: Prayer and guidance**

This chapter looks in turn at dependence on prayer in the process of discernment, at guidance as a spiritual gift, and at the relation between prayer and the exercise of reason.

### **Encounters**

The Encounters section contains the stories of a celibate female gay Christian; a vicar with two daughters, one of whom is heterosexual and in a relationship with a man, and the other gay and in a relationship with someone who 'relates as both male and female' (p 370); someone who used to engage in cross-dressing but has ceased to do so; and a vicar's wife whose father transitioned from male to female.

## **Part Five – Conversing: What can we learn from each other?**

The purpose of Part Five of LLF (a series of four 'conversations') is to invite the readers 'into a conversation between some of the people who have been involved in writing this book.' (This is described in full on p 378). Each 'scene' was 'based on a live conversation that was recorded, transcribed and edited' and each of which answers a different set of questions, as follows:

### **Scene 1: A conversation about marriage**

'Is marriage only between one man and one woman? Are there other forms of covenant that might be possible for other kinds of faithful committed relationships? Or should the nature of the Church of England's understanding of marriage be adapted to include same-sex couples?'

### **Scene 2: A conversation about sex and relationships**

‘What boundaries should we place around sexual activity? Is its only proper place within marriage? Or are there other relationships which can find sexual expression?’

### **Scene 3: A conversation about gender identity and transition**

‘Is our identity entirely God-given and to be accepted? Or do we play a part in making adjustments that help us to live into the identity we believe we are called to have?’

### **Scene 4: A conversation about the life of the Church**

‘How do we respond to Jesus’ call for unity in the light of difference and disagreement? How do we hold together holiness and love?’

### **Encounters**

The Encounters section gives an account of discussions about issues of sexuality and the church’s response to it at three different churches, which are referred to under the imaginary names of St Philip’s Upper Frinton, St Paul’s Howton Hill, and St Mildred’s Upper Mallowpool. Two of these churches have a liberal ethos, whereas the ethos of the third is conservative.

### **An Appeal**

The final section of LLF is described as ‘An Appeal by the Bishops of the Church of England’. As we have noted, the bishops declare in their closing appeal that, in the face of the continuing disagreements among the bishops and in the church as a whole:

...all of us – bishops included – need to go on learning from each other and from all who seek the way of truth. That is the purpose of the *Living in Love and Faith* learning resources – to help us to learn and discern together so that right judgements and godly decisions can be made about our common life. (p 422)

The bishops go on to declare that their hope is that:

...the Holy Spirit will use these learning resources to open a way for us to find our deepest convictions about Jesus Christ also affirmed by those who we presently disagree with. (p 422)

The bishops confess that they feel a tension ‘between uniting the church in its differences and pressing for decisive decisions in the contested areas about which each of us feels strongly.’ However, they are united ‘in our commitment to promote peace in the Church and to strive for the visible unity of the church.’ (p 423)

They close their appeal by referring to the charge given to Peter by Jesus in John 21:15–17 to ‘Feed my sheep’ and aligning this charge to their own calling as bishops:

At our ordinations the Archbishop reminded us in words that resonate with John’s that ‘Bishops are called to serve and care for the flock of Christ. Mindful of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, they are to love and pray for those committed to their charge, knowing their people and being known by them’. During this period of discernment and beyond it, we commit ourselves to ‘knowing our people and being known by them’ in the love of Christ,

'to serve and care for the flock of Christ' in the faith of Christ and 'to promote peace and reconciliation in the church' in the hope of Christ. (pp 423-24)



# Chapter 3

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## A theological response to *Living in Love and Faith*

### **How to live faithfully in an idolatrous society**

This chapter provides a biblical response to LLF in the light of the calling of Christians to live as a distinctive people, acting as salt and light in the midst of the idolatry of contemporary Western society, under the following headings:

- Listening to one another
- The need for ‘double listening’
- Double listening (1) – Listening to the apostles: A fresh historical reading
- Double listening (2) – Listening to the world: A fresh cultural analysis

I will argue that it is vital for the church that its stance on human sexuality is shaped by its mission, which is to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. This is achieved by ‘double listening’ – listening both to the Bible’s view of human sexuality and to the issues we face in our world today.

### **Listening to one another**

*Living in Love and Faith* is the fruit of a detailed, wide-ranging and scholarly round of dialogue and discussion – an attempt to listen to one another – as a means of trying to find an agreed way forward for the Church of England.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, this followed the General Synod vote not to ‘take note’ in 2017 which triggered further conversation about human sexuality.

This process of setting up a charitable conversation – committed to listening to a wide variety of perspectives and personal stories – can hardly be faulted: few stones have

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*FEW STONES  
HAVE BEEN LEFT  
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TONE THROUGHOUT  
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COURTEOUS.*

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been left unturned, and the tone throughout is respectful and courteous. If one of the hallmarks of Anglicanism is its preference for ‘charitable presumption’ – presuming the best motives and intentions of those with whom we

disagree – then this might be praised as the high watermark of such Anglicanism.

Yet the Church of England as an organization does not have the luxury of continuing the conversation *ad infinitum*. As the bishops note in the Introduction, these issues need to be resolved ‘with some urgency’. So decisions have to be made.

‘To bless or not to bless? That is the question.’

**Person A:** No, it’s not the question! Who in this secular age of ours needs divine ‘blessing’? The question we should ask is: are people free to love whom they love? And if they are, society should recognize this fact and give its public approval to any loving couples who desire this recognition? It’s a ‘no-brainer’!

**Person B:** For those of us who believe in the Christian God of love, we would like to give such couples our

support and backing too. Because we are in the church, when we give that support, we will be doing so not just in the name of the church but in the name of God – bestowing on the couple not just our ‘blessing’ but God’s. So the real question is: Does the Christian God wish to endorse a couple’s love and faithfulness? Or, you might even say, does the ‘God of love’ love love?! Put like that, it’s a ‘no-brainer’!

**Person C:** But aren’t you forgetting something? The Christian ‘God of love’ revealed to us in the Bible as the God who created us as men and women in his image has revealed to us how we are to live in his created order. Such couples would be acting in a way which is contrary to his will, so operating outside the sphere of his ‘blessing’. Can the church bless in God’s name what God himself does not bless?

Many of us, as worshipping members within the worldwide Anglican Communion, will have heard such a conversation as the one above. Three perspectives – one (A) secular, the other two (B and C) Christian – so how do we respond to same-sex couples?

Increasingly, there is a parallel conversation about transgender. What of those who claim a transgender identity? Does Christian love mean accepting and affirming how they see themselves, even if it is counter to the sex of their bodies? Or should we tell them that obedience to God means living in the body he has given, however psychologically difficult they may find this?

In addition, there are other conversations about the lifestyles of people who are neither same-sex attracted

nor transgender. Is pre-marital sex ever acceptable? Is it ever right for someone to cohabit with their boyfriend or girlfriend? Would it be right to have sex with a sex robot? When (if ever) is it right for someone to get divorced? What forms of contraception are morally legitimate?

Conversations about such matters have taken place in Anglican churches for a very long time, as records of the Lambeth Conferences show.<sup>1</sup> However, since the 1970s, discussions about same-sex sexual relationships have come to the fore. And in North America and elsewhere, the evident discrepancy between viewpoints B and C has led to church divisions as fellow-Anglicans have recognized the hard-nosed and obvious reality – that no voluntary organization can publicly endorse two mutually-contradictory stances and hope to maintain the allegiance and commitment of its members.

Just as an organization could not survive for long if it campaigned both *for* and *against* fox hunting, so too the church cannot survive for long as a coherent organization if it takes a public stance both *for* and *against* the blessing of same-sex couples. Sooner or later a decision has to be made – for or against. ‘Are we in or are we out?’

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**WE CANNOT ‘LIMP  
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BETWEEN TWO  
CONTRADICTIONARY  
VIEWPOINTS**

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If there truly is irreconcilable incompatibility between Viewpoints B and C, then we do not have a choice. We cannot ‘limp along’ forever, endlessly ‘doing the splits’, between two

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1. Divorce was on the agenda of the Lambeth Conference in 1888 and birth control in 1908.

contradictory viewpoints. Even though LLF will help us to continue the conversation, does it help us towards making a decision? Has it given us the resources with which to bring this matter to some closure and resolution? The bishops are hoping that this process will help us to hear Scripture, tradition and reason more faithfully.<sup>2</sup> The question is, do the LLF materials enable this, or have these classic tools of Anglican theology been blunted?

The danger of a rightly charitable methodology – presenting viewpoints in their best light and ensuring a tone of ‘good disagreement’ – is that it can lead to a naive optimism that awkward, angular disagreements of theology and practice can somehow be dissolved. There can also lie some wishful thinking that disagreements can be softened through giving space for patient listening to the ‘other side’ and through helping people to be less wedded to their own personal convictions. If the wishful thinking comes to pass, then the ‘best outcome’ from those who desire consensus is to drive the church towards a dissolution of its biblical convictions.

This book is written primarily for those with strong biblically-grounded convictions, who find themselves identifying most readily with Person C in the imaginary conversation. We are those Anglicans:

- who seek, by exercising repentance and faith, to submit our lives to our wonderful Saviour, Jesus Christ, and for his sake also place ourselves under the teaching of his apostles and the entire canon of Scripture, receiving this as the ‘whole counsel of God’

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2. *Living in Love and Faith*, viii.

(Acts 20:27) and as a revelation breathed out from God by his Holy Spirit

- who 'glory in Christ Jesus', both his person and his work, and who seek to obey his authoritative word and to be open to his powerful Spirit
- who are committed to the church as the people of Jesus and indeed as the 'body of Christ', and long for the good news of God's grace to shine ever more brightly through his people as they follow God in his mission to his world

We are convinced that Anglicanism, as evidenced in its historical formularies, embodies biblical faith. So we are determined, by God's grace, to preserve and safeguard this precious deposit of faith from anything that might undermine it, or cause the beautiful light of Jesus to shine less brightly through his people. If we are sometimes termed 'conservative', it is because we seek to preserve what we ourselves have received for the benefit of others – that they too may experience the abundance of God's blessing through the gospel.

### **Questions about LLF**

Viewing matters from this vantage-point, we may want to ask questions of LLF. For example:

1. Has it adequately presented this vision of Jesus and the good news of the gospel?
2. How has it handled the Scriptures as the word of God? Can we hear God's word more clearly, or has our capacity to hear his voice through Scripture been weakened?<sup>3</sup>

3. Does it reflect a true understanding of the nature of fallen human beings?
4. What lies at the theological centre of its ‘all-inclusive’ conversation? Is there a danger that this centre might become a new driving force in the life of the church, potentially taking the church away from Christ who alone is its true centre and ‘head’ (Ephesians 4:15)?<sup>4</sup>
5. What is LLF’s vision of the church, and the church’s mission in the world?

We will focus primarily on the last of these. In what ways will the LLF material help us to take forward Jesus’ mission through his church?

This might not seem the most appropriate question to bring to a document which does not purport to talk about mission. Isn’t this simply an extended discussion about a point of dispute within our common life? If, as we believe, the church exists (in the famous words of Archbishop William Temple) ‘for the benefit of its non-members’, then any discussion about the church and the ordering of its common life, must be assessed for its knock-on consequences; for its ability to communicate the ‘gospel afresh in every generation’ as Canon C15 puts it.

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3. This issue is addressed in Chapter 3 of this book.

4. The issues of what church political agenda may underly LLF, and what theological understanding of the nature of the Church of England this agenda reflects, fall outside the scope of both this book. Our focus is on what LLF says rather than what may lie behind it. However, these issues are important and may require additional work.

## The need for ‘double listening’

‘Double listening’ – a phrase coined by John Stott – refers to listening to the biblical text in its historical context, and

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*MAY WE FIND THE  
LIGHT OF JESUS’  
TRUTH GUIDING US  
THROUGH IT.*

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listening to the issues of the world in our own context. In working to do this here, we trust a picture will emerge which will allow the apostles’ concerns for

the mission of the church to be heard with a new relevance, and seen with a new clarity. In all the complexity and confusion of this painfully contested debate, may we find the light of Jesus’ truth guiding us through it.

We start by stepping back into the biblical world, immersing ourselves in the life and times of the early Christian communities, seeking to get ‘inside their shoes’ and to breathe in some deep draughts of biblical air. We need to allow the worldview of the apostles to recalibrate our own. To do this, we will focus mainly on the text of 1 Peter but also Ephesians 4–5, listening to the authoritative teaching of Peter and Paul on holiness and sexual ethics within the life of Jesus’ church. Then we will seek to gain a critical perspective on our own cultural context in the ‘Western world’, drawing on the insights of Carl Trueman in his book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*.<sup>5</sup>

### **Double listening (1) – Listening to the apostles: a fresh historical reading**

#### **Peter and the calling of the church in a pagan world**

The book of 1 Peter was written by Jesus’ chief apostle to encourage the Christians scattered throughout the Roman provinces of Asia Minor such as Bithynia and Pontus (on



the Black Sea in modern Turkey). It gives a window through which to observe the extraordinary phenomenon of first-century Christianity.

If aliens from Mars visited Planet Earth every fifty years, and returned around the year AD 60, they would have been amazed at what had sprung up since their previous visit. Here now, scattered around some far-flung parts of the Roman Empire, and also outside it in places such as Ethiopia and Persia, was a group of people who had come to love a man whom they'd never seen (1:8), who had lived and died far away in the Roman province of Palestine, and who, they claimed, had been raised by God from the dead (1:3).

This raising of the man called Jesus, the Martians were told, now made it possible for his followers to come into a whole new experience – seeing themselves as individuals raised from death into a new life as ‘children of God’, given a new birth into his family, and called to love their brothers and sisters ‘deeply from the heart’ (1:22). It was evidently a community that, despite going through some severe trials, spoke often of experiencing ‘grace and peace’, ‘joy’, ‘hope’ and ‘salvation’ (1:2, 3, 8, 9).

Above all, they observed that here was a people-group permeated through and through by a new kind of love (for which a new word had been coined in Greek: *agape*). It was a community of deep friendship and marked by ‘brotherly affection’ (philadelphia). It was radically different from the surrounding culture where such love was so easily eclipsed by a focus on sexual love (*eros*). Could such a love-centred

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5. Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self Living in Love and Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

community, they might ask, survive in such a hostile or cynical environment?

Our Martian visitors might have been suitably impressed when they returned fifty years later, to read reports from

*CHRIST-CENTRED  
THEOLOGY IS  
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TEACHING*

Pliny the Younger (the Roman governor of Bithynia) that this 'superstition' had not died out but had 'spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms'.<sup>6</sup> Yet, so Pliny told them,

the extent of the 'offense' of these 'Christians' was simply that they met each Sunday morning to 'sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not to falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so'.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, this community was continuing in its calling to practise its Christ-centred theology – worshipping Jesus and living out his teaching in both love and faith. Yet Pliny and many in the ancient world were deeply sceptical, presuming that these worship services were excuses for sexual licence, to which a Christian shortly afterwards was able to give the following apt reply: 'We have a common table, but not a common bed.'<sup>8</sup>

Peter would have rejoiced to see his readers' descendants maintaining the life of Jesus in such evident love and faith. This community of love and light had not had its light extinguished nor its love corrupted. As one commissioned by Jesus to look after this 'flock' (5:1), Peter was aware of imminent dangers: fierce persecution from outside or moral corruption from within could so easily bring an end to this remarkable phenomenon – of an international group of people experiencing new life in Jesus. And so he wrote to

conserve this vibrant life, to prevent it from being dissipated or snuffed out. He wrote with passion and warmth, wanting them to be energised in their ‘faith’ (1:7), to provide them with confident ‘hope’ (1:3) and to stir their hearts towards a deep ‘love’ for each other as believers (2:17). Yet he wrote too with a seriousness and sobriety, knowing he had to strengthen their wills to obey Jesus Christ, to turn away from evil, to resist the Evil One, to face suffering (1:1–16, 22; 3:14–18; 5:9). And one of the methods to achieve this was to help them ‘gird up the loins of their minds’ (1:13 in AKJV), instilling within them a distinctively Christian mindset. He wanted them to get their thinking straight and to develop a deeply biblical worldview, allowing the resurrection of Jesus in the past (1:3) and his ‘revelation’ in the future (1:7, 13) to be the two fixed points between which they could navigate the trapeze act of walking faithfully as his servants, not falling off the wire.

### **Peter’s worldview**

In our own day, those convinced of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, who have ‘tasted the kindness of the Lord’ (2:3) and who have experienced this vibrant and abundant life must not be presumptuous or complacent. To conserve such apostolic life and truth for the generations to come – and to respond rightly to LLF – requires a constant alignment to the main themes of Peter’s worldview. Let’s look at how Peter and his readers might have answered three key questions:<sup>9</sup>

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6. Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10:96–97.

7. Pliny the Younger, *Letters*.

8. The Epistle to Diognetus 5 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol 1 (Edinburgh and Grand Rapids: T&T Clark / Eerdmans, 1996), 26.

9. These are effectively the same three questions (concerning monotheism, election and eschatology) as used by Tom Wright to articulate the worldview of second-temple Judaism: see *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992).

**Question 1: Who is our God? How does he reveal his character?**

Peter makes it clear that God is the 'faithful Creator' (4:19), the one who spoke by his Spirit through the Old Testament prophets. He is the God of Israel who revealed himself at Sinai as a God of holiness (1:15–16) thus to be viewed with 'fear' as an impartial 'judge' (1:17). Yet he is also now to be known and loved as the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:3) and as the 'God of all grace' (5:10). Peter's opening greeting artlessly speaks in Trinitarian terms of 'God the Father', 'the Spirit' and 'Jesus Christ' (1:2). This Jesus, recently revealed (thirty years earlier) in human history, can now be seen as like a 'lamb', 'chosen before the creation of the world': he shares in God's divinity and eternity. This Jesus, though 'chosen and precious' in God's sight, was 'rejected by humans' in Jerusalem and on the receiving end of insults (2:23). Yet he did not retaliate but instead went to the cross where he 'bore our sins in his own body' (2:24). However, he was gloriously raised from the dead (1:3), fulfilling a journey of 'suffering' followed by 'glory' (1:11). And the fullness of that glory will be 'revealed at his coming' (1:13).

**Question 2: Who are we as the people of God?**

LLF focuses on the church in society, but Peter focuses on the church itself, and its members as God's people. For the apostle, that is a Christian's primary identity. His prose is fast-flowing and dense.

Through responding to the preaching of this 'good news' (1:12), 'obeying the truth' (1:22) and 'believing' in this Jesus (1:8), we can experience a 'new birth' (1:3, 23). This is effectively a raising from the dead premised upon God's raising of Jesus (1:3) and can also be seen as the

result of God's word growing like a 'seed' within our lives (1:23). This means we are no longer 'ignorant' of God but instead have been 'redeemed' (1:18) and accepted as God's 'children' (1:14). We are still to approach God with a posture of 'reverence' and 'fear' (1:17; cf. 2:18), but we experience his 'joy' and 'grace' (1:10) and are promised the eventual 'salvation of our souls' (1:9). Furthermore, we discover that we have been brought into a new community which can be seen in various ways: as a like a flock overseen by Jesus the 'Shepherd' (2:25), as like a spiritual temple built on Jesus as a 'living stone' (2:4) and as a holy 'priesthood' (2:5). Indeed, like Israel in the Old Testament (Exodus 19:6), we are a 'chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (2:9). Though formerly from Gentile backgrounds and thus 'not a people', we now find we are the 'people of God' (1:10).

### **Question 3: What are God's ultimate purposes, and how do we fit into them?**

The end-goal of God's purposes is that moment when 'Jesus Christ will be revealed' (1:7). In the meantime our calling as God's people is to 'declare the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light' (2:9). We do this by 'preaching the gospel' (1:12) but also by living 'such good lives among the pagans that they glorify God on the day he visits us' (2:12). We are thus given a clear call (as was ancient Israel) to 'be holy', reflecting the holiness of God (1:16; cf. Leviticus 11:44–45) and allowing his light to be seen by those outside the community (cf. Isaiah 49:6). This requires ridding ourselves of various sinful attitudes (2:1) but also refusing to 'confirm to the evil desires' (*epithumiais*) we once had (1:14) and to 'abstain from sinful desires which wage war against the soul' (2:11).

‘This is our God’, Peter is effectively saying. ‘This is what he has done for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is who he has made us. And this is now our calling – to live out before a watching world what it means to be the redeemed people of the Creator God.’<sup>10</sup>

This remains our calling in the church today: to live as the redeemed people of the Creator God in such a way that the

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***OUR CALLING IS  
TO LIVE AS THE  
REDEEMED PEOPLE  
OF THE CREATOR  
GOD***

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image of God is not obscured by us but rather is seen more clearly. Jesus called us to be the ‘light of the world’ (Matthew 5:14), allowing God’s light to shine through us. It’s not our calling to tarnish or obscure that light – living in ways that contradict (or ‘speak against’) the character of our Creator God who has redeemed us, or that are contrary to his creation (in Greek: *para phusin*). In being called into the personal knowledge of God, we are called to walk away from the ‘empty’ ways associated with those who are ‘ignorant’ (1:14, 18) – precisely in order that they may be given an opportunity to know him for themselves. Our evangelistic mission, seeking to bring others to ‘know that the Lord is good’, is thus very dependent on our obedient ethics. For how will people come to know their Maker if they do not see his own people following the Maker’s instructions?

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10. In his first two chapters, Peter twice alludes to God’s self-revelation at Mount Sinai (in quoting Leviticus 11 and Exodus 19 in 1:15 and 2:9). He is alerting his hearers that they too, like ancient Israel, are called to be a distinctive counter-cultural community, a ‘royal priesthood’ showing outsiders the truth about the Creator God as well as his holy nature, and what he requires of those whom he has ‘called unto himself’. For how else will people who are ignorant of their Creator come to know him, if God’s own people do not reveal his likeness?

## **Ethnicity and ethics**

Peter's readers were not being urged to live out this distinctive witness in a cultural 'bubble' or ghetto. Ancient Israel for some seasons of its life had been able to practise the worship of Yahweh in comparative exclusion from the surrounding nations. Not so for the young Christian community, which lived fully *within* a pagan culture.<sup>11</sup>

The early church was different from diaspora Judaism in that it held that Gentiles could become part of the people of God while still remaining Gentiles (see Acts 15:1–35 and Galatians throughout).

First-century Judaism held that those who had been Gentiles could become part of the people of God and the evidence suggests that numerous people did so.<sup>12</sup> However, they could only do so by agreeing to observe the Jewish law in its entirety. When they did so they ceased to be Gentiles and became Jewish.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the ethnic division between Jews and Gentiles continued to be maintained.

Much to his shock, and against some of his preferences (as seen in his actions in Acts 10–11 and Galatians 2), Peter had learnt the hard way that the age-old ethnic division

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11. In this they were following in the steps of Jewish people in the diaspora who for several centuries had practised their obedience to the Torah whilst immersed within a pagan culture and who had necessarily built up some significant 'boundary-markers' around their communities to distinguish the members of the Jewish nation from those belonging to other nations. Their developing food-laws, for example, neatly kept them visibly distinct as a nation (singular: *ethnos*) when otherwise surrounded by Gentiles (plural: *ethnee*)

12. For an overview of the evidence see Louis Feldman, 'Conversion to Judaism in Classical Antiquity,' *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol, 74 (2003), 115–156.

13. References to these converts or 'proselytes' can be found for example in Acts 2:10, 6:5 and 13:43.

between Jews and Gentiles had been rendered null and void in Jesus. As Paul would put it, the 'boundary wall of hostility had been broken down (Ephesians 2:11–21). This meant that the boundary markers (such as kosher food laws and circumcision) which served to distinguish Jews from Gentiles were no longer relevant. However, this understanding in turn raised the question, if these boundary lines had now been destroyed in Christ, how should the early church maintain its distinctiveness? If it was not to be an *ethnically* distinctive community in the traditional Jewish way, then how was it to be distinctive? What could now serve as the necessary border between the early church and paganism?

The apostles insisted that the church of Jesus was to keep itself distinct from the surrounding culture not only through

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**THE CHURCH OF  
JESUS WAS TO KEEP  
ITSELF DISTINCT**

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its Christ-centred *theology* (worship of the one true creator God rather than the false gods and idols of paganism) but also

through its *ethics* – living lives of holiness and ethical purity in obedience to the laws for human living given by the one true God. Previously, the one true God could have been identified by outsiders through seeing the members of a particular nation (or ethnicity) living out a distinct lifestyle. Now, however, outsiders were confronted with an inter-ethnic community, so what they needed to see was that distinctive lifestyle. No longer was the *ethnicity* of God's people a sign or pointer to God's character; the focus now had to be on his people's *ethics*.

This meant, inevitably, that the New Testament writers had two markedly different approaches to *ethnicity* and *ethics*. With regard to issues of ethnicity, they had a radically inclusive approach: all ethnic identities (whether



Jewish, Greek, barbarian or Scythian – Colossians 3:11) were welcome in the church and to be included ‘in Christ’. With regard to issues of *ethics*, however, they were strict and ‘exclusive’: ‘for God did not call us to be impure but to live a holy life’ (1 Thessalonians 4:7). Thus Peter’s vision is of a fully international community (including those Gentiles who were previously ‘not a people’) which is marked by a ‘purified’ ‘obedience’ to God’s truth and thus is truly a ‘holy nation’ (2:9).

This distinction between ethnic identity and ethical obedience is of critical importance as we respond to LLF in three important ways.

First, we must be cautious in conceding the claims that homosexual practice is to be construed as a matter of identity, not of ethics. Suggesting that homosexual rights are comparable to black rights or the rights of other ethnic minorities (as in the mantra, ‘gay is the new black’) deliberately confuses this point. It crosses a boundary line that was keenly defended by the apostles, attempting to make the issue one which they would surely speak in favour of (so it is alleged) rather than speak against (which is what they actually did).

Secondly, we should have concerns when Paul’s apparently relaxed approach to issues such as food laws (which, for Paul, were issues of ethnic boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles) are held up as a model for how he would have been relaxed about issues that he would have seen as strictly ethical. In particular, his magnanimous approach in Romans 14 to those with tender consciences about eating non-*kosher* food (which causes him to introduce the category of issues that are ‘indifferent’ or *adiaphora*),

cannot be used to suggest he would have seen issues of sexual immorality as similarly adiaphora – as things we can have a ‘good disagreement’ about, simply agreeing to disagree and pursuing our divergent practices. LLF’s discussion of Romans 14 fails to make this point clear.<sup>14</sup> What Paul writes in Romans 14 deals with the specific issue of ethnic boundary markers, and cannot be used as a paradigm for current differences over sexual ethics.

Thirdly, it helps to explain why the New Testament writers so frequently emphasize holiness of life and obedient ethics. They needed to do that for the integrity of their message. Failure to maintain godliness in the church would obscure the difference between light and darkness, and obscure the visibility of God’s holy character. The apostles could not simply teach abstract theology, or focus merely on God’s love and grace. They had to tie this theology to the ground, to life lived in the real world. Thus, while many of their writings focused on matters of doctrine and ortho-*doxy*, an equal (if not greater) number focused on ethics and ortho-*praxy*. They wanted to protect the early church from being enticed by a trivialized version of grace into harbouring sin and licentiousness (see, for example, Romans 3:8; Galatians 5:13–23; Jude 4).

All this will cause us to ask whether LLF has given due weight to this passionate concern of the apostles for the holiness of Jesus’ church for the sake of her mission to the world.

### **Paul’s teaching on *porneia***

We need to feel the full force of this apostolic concern and to allow the words of Paul’s letters to corroborate what we have

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14. *Living in Love Faith*, 303–05.

seen so clearly in 1 Peter. Both writers emphasize the need for holiness and godliness in all its forms (Ephesians 4:25–32; 1 Peter 2:1, 13–16) including godliness in sexual matters. Peter comes round to these issues three times in his letter: ‘Do not conform to evil desires...’ (1:14); ‘abstain from sinful pleasures...’ (2:11); ‘do not live ... for evil human desires’ (4:2). His word for desires (*epithumiais*) would have been heard as including a reference to sexual desires; but, as if to avoid any confusion, he finally spells out what he is referring to: ‘debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry’ (4:3).

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***BOTH WRITERS  
EMPHASIZE THE  
NEED FOR HOLINESS  
AND GODLINESS***

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Paul has similar vice lists in several of his letters (eg 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, Galatians 5:19–21, Colossians 3:5–11, 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8), but his fuller argumentation in Ephesians 4 and 5 is perhaps the most helpful for our purposes:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds ... They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practise every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! – assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self [*anthropos*], which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self [*anthropos*], created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

... But fornication [*porneia*], and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. ... Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them, for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it is said, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light'. (Ephesians 4:17, 19–24; 5:3–14)

Paul's apostolic insistence on ethics is clear. Holiness of life is not an optional extra but the clear end goal of all the glorious truths and doctrines outlined in Ephesians 1–3. If the Ephesian believers have truly been taught 'the truth as it is in Jesus', if they have truly 'learned Christ', they will know that putting off their old selves (the old way of being human [*anthropos* in Greek]) is an essential part of the Jesus-message. Jesus had indeed called his disciples to 'deny themselves' (Mark 8:34), but now Paul builds on this foundation highlighting the post-resurrection reality that there is a glorious new resurrection self that is now available to take the place of the old. Because believers are now 'alive in Christ' (Ephesians 2:5), there is a new way of

being human; they are 'new creations' (2 Corinthians 5:17) and this new creation is, of course, something which has been 'created after the likeness of God' (Ephesians 4:24). We must have this distinctive apostolic anthropology in our minds when we move on to hear Paul's teaching on sexual ethics. It will be logically impossible for Paul even to conceive of an acceptable form of sexual activity for such 'newly created' people which runs counter to the way God has created their physical bodies. If homosexuality is 'contrary to nature' as originally created by God, how much more will this be the case for those who have been made new creations 'after the likeness of God' by that same Creator God?

So as Paul moves on to talk about sexual issues (5:3–14), it is logical to deduce that his critique of sexual immorality would have included all forms of homosexual practice – because he would have seen it as inherently contrary to the nature not only of the 'old' creation, but also now of the 'new' creation.

The only word that Paul uses to introduce his discussion of sexual sin is *porneia* (translated as 'fornication' in 5:3). This word in Greek is a catch-all word, including far more than the word 'fornication' signifies in English. It is used in the New Testament to refer to 'unlawful sexual intercourse' which means any form of sexual activity forbidden in the Law of Moses.<sup>15</sup> This in turn means any form of sexual activity which falls outside the pattern of marriage between one man and one woman established by God in Genesis 2:18–24.

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15. Walter Bauer, F W Gingrich and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1979), 693.

So, when Jesus and the New Testament writers (in passages such as here and Mark 7:21, Acts 15:20, 1 Thessalonians 4:3) assert that *porneia* is strictly 'off limits' for God's new covenant people, this means that Christian believers are forbidden to engage in any of these forms of illicit sexual activity.

As Larry Hurtado points out in his book *Destroyer of the gods*, in Greco-Roman society respectable married women were expected to be 'one-man women', having sexual intercourse only with their husbands.<sup>16</sup> Men, however, were free to have sex with whoever they liked – with only freeborn virgins and other men's wives being 'off-limits'. The apostolic prohibition of *porneia* involved a radical rejection of this view of sexual ethics. Among Christians, men were now bound by the same rules that previously applied only to their wives. Jesus and the apostles, standing four-square on the ethics of the Old Testament and the Law of Moses, were calling for marital chastity to be observed by both sexes – with total sexual abstinence as the only alternative.

For the same reason, sexual abstinence outside marriage also included abstinence from same-sex sexual relationships. Such relationships were contrary to the Law of Moses (Leviticus 18:23, 20:13, Deuteronomy 23:17–18). So when the New Testament writers used the catch-all word *porneia*, it is impossible to suggest that they might not have had homosexual practice within their view. Indeed, sometimes it may have been seemly and polite not to spell out the unpleasant details of which precise sexual sins they were referring to (as seems to be the case here in Ephesians 5:12 where Paul is somewhat embarrassed even

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Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods* (Waco: Baylor University Press), 154–167.

to mention by name what people get up to ‘in secret’). On other occasions, however, it became necessary to ‘call a spade a spade’: hence the several New Testament passages which specifically reject as sinful all forms of same-sex sexual relationships (Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 7). So, once we develop this understanding of *porneia*, we can see that the New Testament’s prohibition on same-sex sexual activity was far more pervasive than these four passages might suggest. Instead, they were but the tip of a very large iceberg, which had deep depths – as it were, ‘below the water-line’. To change the metaphor, they were rooted in the centuries-long experience of God’s redeemed people following their Creator God according to his revealed will in his law.

### **Conclusion**

Both Peter and Paul strongly desired that the first Christian churches should be communities filled with a new kind of love – full of *philadelphia* love, full of *agape* love – reflecting the gracious and compassionate love of God shown in Jesus: ‘love one another deeply’ (1 Peter 1:22); ‘walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us’ (Ephesians 5:2). Yet they knew that such *agape* love, however fulsome, needed boundaries and that talk of ‘love’ on its own could too easily be construed in sexual ways that would destroy the very love that Jesus had freshly brought into the world.

So, to safeguard these communities of love, the apostles instilled within them a sense of their new identity and calling. Peter and Paul taught them to see themselves as those who had been given ‘new birth’ and made into ‘new creations’ by the death and resurrection of Jesus. They were the redeemed people of the Creator God – now revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This God had called them

to be a missionary community, bearing witness before the surrounding world to his light, truth and love. Jesus himself had called them to maintain this distinctive witness – as salt that retained its flavour and as a light that could be seen (Matthew 5:13–16). And this calling required that, as God’s newly-created people living within a pagan and idolatrous society, they had to be distinctive – not only in their theology and worship but also in their ethics and behaviour. And one part of this ethically distinctive way of life, as we have seen, was for Christians to rule out all forms of sexual activity that were contrary to the pattern of sex within heterosexual marriage as established by God at creation – same-sex relationships included.

On transgender: Unlike same-sex sexual relationships, this issue is not specifically addressed in the New Testament. This is because transgender, as we know it today, is a modern phenomenon, which began to develop only in the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the basis for a Christian approach to transgender is contained in the biblical material.

The Bible teaches that God has created human beings as a union of a material body and an immaterial soul. In this union a person’s sex (whether they are male or female) is determined by the way that their body has been designed

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***THE SOUL DOES NOT  
HAVE A SEX OF ITS  
OWN***

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to play a particular role in the process of sexual reproduction, and in the nurture of children.

As an immaterial entity, the soul does not have a sex of its own. Its sex is the sex of the body to which it is united (which is why it would make no sense

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17. See J Alan Branch, *Affirming God’s Image* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2019), Ch 1.



to talk about a male soul trapped in a female body, or vice versa).

Furthermore, like the prohibition of cross-dressing in Deuteronomy 22:5 and Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 – that men should follow the dress and hair codes which proclaim them to be male, and women the codes which proclaim them to be female – this testifies to the belief Christians are called to live as the male and female human beings God created them to be. To live otherwise is to reject the authority of God as Creator.

Viewed from a biblical perspective, all issues to do with sexual behaviour and identity, whether heterosexual sex, homosexual sex, or transgender, must be governed by the way that God has created us. If God in his infinite wisdom and goodness has created his human creatures to exist in a particular way, then living rightly before God means living in that way. Conversely, all forms of sexual behaviour, and all claims of sexual identity, that go against how God has created us have to be regarded as off limits because they amount to a refusal to let God be God by insisting on trying to go our own way instead.

By listening carefully to the apostles, we have sensed their ardent desire to build a new Jesus-centred community which was inter- racially inclusive but ethically exclusive, filled with love but not corrupted by licence. It was to be a beacon of light in a world darkened by idolatry and by ignorance of the Creator God who had recently visited the world in his Son. The apostles had a strong concern that the church of Jesus maintain its distinctive witness to the world

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*IT WAS TO BE A  
BEACON OF LIGHT IN  
A WORLD DARKENED  
BY IDOLATRY*

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for the sake of its primary missional task – passing on the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. Their priorities are directly relevant to our assessment of the LLF material.

## **Double listening (2) – Listening to the world: a fresh cultural analysis**

As Christians in the Church of England today, we have the same calling as the Christians addressed by Peter and the other New Testament writers. We are called to be a missionary community, theologically and ethically distinctive within our society.

### **The rise and ‘triumph’ of the self: seven key steps**

We first have to understand our society with its self-obsession. This self-obsession is often referred to by the short hand term ‘individualism’. If this term is taken to mean a due regard for the *importance* of the individual then this shorthand is misleading. From a Christian perspective there is nothing wrong with giving due regard to the importance of the individual. Indeed, as Larry Sidentop argues, the very idea of the individual as we know it in the West today emerged out the Christian belief that every human being has a ‘God given human identity’ which ‘all humans share equally’ and which imposes ‘opportunities and obligations’ on each individual human being.<sup>18</sup> The problem has come because since the Enlightenment this Christian emphasis on the importance of the individual has mutated into the idea that the subjective feelings and desires of the individual self are to be regarded as the yardstick for what is true and what is good.

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18. Larry Sidentop, *Inventing the Individual* (London: Penguin, 2017), Kindle Edition, 252–53.

A helpful guide to this development is Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* in which he traces the development of Western thought and society since the second half of the eighteenth century.

In his Introduction, Trueman explains how the book's origins lay in his curiosity

...about how and why a particular statement has come to be regarded as coherent and meaningful: 'I am a woman trapped in a man's body.' My grandfather died in 1994, less than thirty years ago, and yet, had he ever heard that sentence uttered in his presence, I have little doubt that he would have burst out laughing and considered it a piece of incoherent gibberish. And yet today it is a sentence that many in our society regard as not only meaningful but so significant that to deny it or question it in some way is to reveal oneself as stupid, immoral, or subject to yet another irrational phobia.<sup>19</sup>

In Trueman's view, the reason it has come to be regarded as meaningful to say 'I am a woman trapped in a man's body' (and as unacceptable to question this statement) comes from a number of interrelated developments in Western society since the eighteenth century. Taken together, they form a radical shift in what Trueman calls the 'social imaginary' – that is, the way most people understand the world and how to behave within it.<sup>20</sup>

The seven steps or developments are as follows:

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19. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 19.

20. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 36–37.

1. The **secularisation of Western society** and the consequent **loss of the sense of the world as God's creation** means that there has been a shift in people's views of the world from mimesis (from the Greek for 'imitation') to poesis (meaning 'creating'). As Trueman explains: 'A mimetic view regards the world as having a given order and a given meaning and thus sees human beings as required to discover that meaning and conform themselves to it. Poesis, by way of contrast, sees the world as so much raw material out of which meaning and purpose can be created by the individual.'<sup>21</sup>
2. There has been the **related loss of the idea of 'sacred order'**. In Western culture today most people no longer believe that there is fixed moral order which has been established by God and which all human beings therefore need to respect.
3. As a result **Western culture lacks an agreed basis for ethics**. So, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, the basis of ethical decision-making has, by default, become mere emotivism – that is, **ethics based on personal feeling and preference**.<sup>22</sup>
4. There has also been **a change in the way in which most people view the purpose of human existence** – the good to which human beings should aspire. What has emerged is what Charles Taylor calls a 'culture of authenticity'. This is an understanding of life ... that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our

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21. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 39.

22. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own way – as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or by the previous generation, or religious or political authority.<sup>23</sup>

5. Next, there has been the development of what Philip Rieff calls the 'therapeutic society' – a society in which **social institutions are viewed as being set up to foster the individual's sense of psychological well-being** as they live out their authentic existence.<sup>24</sup>
6. Since the work of Sigmund Freud, many now believe that 'humans, from infancy onward, are at core sexual beings. It is our **sexual desires that are ultimately decisive for who we are.**'<sup>25</sup> The acceptance of Freud's ideas has been facilitated by the huge growth in pornography but also the many developments in modern medicine which make the results of sexual activity less serious by separating sex from childbirth and by providing more effective treatment for sexually-transmitted diseases.
7. Finally, the work of Neo-Marxist scholars such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse has led to the idea that the **traditional view of the family** (consisting of a married couple and their children) together with the traditional sexual morality linked to this, are **inherently oppressive** and need to be overthrown.

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23. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge Mass, and London: Belknap Press, 2007), 475.

24. See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966).

25. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 27.

### **Imaginary identity and subjective experience**

As Trueman argues, the result of these seven developments has led to our living in a world of our creating. In such a world the idea of being a woman trapped in a man's body begins to make sense. On the one hand, there is no fixed order of things, and no fixed pattern for human existence or behaviour; thus there is no yardstick against which one can measure whether the idea is wrong. On the other, it becomes perfectly natural for an individual to say something such as:

The purpose of my existence is to live as authentically as possible in accordance with what I perceive to be my true self. If this then involves seeing myself as a woman, even though I have a man's body, then that is what I should do.

Furthermore, society should support me in so doing because only then will I achieve psychological well-being. Thinking otherwise is immoral because it involves damaging my psychological well-being through a refusal to give recognition to who I believe myself to be.

The same factors create a social imaginary in which the acceptance of same-sex relationships and the claim to a gay or lesbian identity also makes sense. Again, there is no fixed order of things and no fixed pattern for human behaviour, and thus no yardstick against which one can say same-sex relationships are wrong. And so the individual may often justify an action as follows:

The purpose of my existence is to live as authentically as possible in accordance with what I perceive to be

my true self. If this involves having sex with someone of my own sex, then that is what I should do. In addition, because, as Freud has taught us, sexual desire is at the core of human identity, my desire for sex with someone of my own sex defines who I am. I *am* gay or lesbian.

As Trueman goes on to say, within this worldview:

...mere tolerance of homosexuality is bound to become unacceptable. The issue is not one of simply decriminalizing behaviour; that would certainly mean that homosexual acts were tolerated by society, but the acts are only part of the overall problem. The real issue is one of recognition, of recognizing the legitimacy of who the person thinks he actually is. This requires more than mere tolerance, it requires equality before the law and recognition by the law and in society. And that means that those who refuse to grant such recognition will be the ones who find themselves on the wrong side of both the law and emerging social attitudes.

The person who objects to homosexual practice is, in contemporary society, actually objecting to homosexual identity. And the refusal by any individual to recognize an identity that society at large recognizes as legitimate is a moral offense, not simply a matter of indifference.<sup>26</sup>

This is why LGBTQI+ campaigners react so strongly against the idea that those Christians who object to same-sex

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26. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 68–69.

sexual relationships can speak of ‘hating the sin but loving the sinner’. Within a post-Freudian worldview, sexual identity and sexual behaviour cannot be separated. Hence, to hate the sin is also to hate the sinner.

It also explains why LGBTQI+ campaigners will not be content with anything less than the transformation of the Church of England into a body that unreservedly affirms lesbian and gay relationships and all forms of transgender activity. Anything less involves a failure to give due recognition to the fundamental identities of the people concerned and is, as such, morally unacceptable.

An additional but related aspect of modern Western culture is the central place given to personal experience. If there is no fixed moral order, how should individuals decide how they should live? The answer increasingly is that they should simply ‘try it and see’. In other words, as they proceed through life they should decide, on the basis of their personal experience, what pattern of life, and what pattern of sexual identity and activity, gives them that sense of psychological well-being which is the proper goal of life.

As Trueman points out, this idea of experience as normative can be found in one of the seminal works of modern Western thought, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*.<sup>27</sup> Life, according to Rousseau, should be lived on the basis of reflecting on one’s experience. This approach stands in contrast to the earlier *Confessions* of Augustine.<sup>28</sup> For Augustine what is normative is not his experiences, but the

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27. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Ch 3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

28. Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).



teaching of Scripture, since it is only through the witness of Scripture that he is able to make sense of his experiences.

### **Modern idolatry**

Trueman gives a fresh and comprehensive analysis of how our society has come to be what it is: a place where human beings are playing the role of their creator, constructing identities for themselves, and testing everything at the solitary bar of subjective experience.

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*HUMAN BEINGS ARE  
PLAYING THE ROLE  
OF THEIR CREATOR*

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Objective ‘out-there’ reality has been substituted for ‘in-here’ reality which may prove more imaginary than true. This raises the tragic possibility that people may claim false self-constructed identities, based on experience and on created reality. The God of the Bible, their Creator, is beyond their grasp.

From a biblical perspective, this sounds ominously like human beings trying to be ‘like God’ (Genesis 3:5). ‘The difference between humans and God’, as one quip has it, ‘is that God doesn’t think he is *us*!’ We, however, dare to think we are *him* and start playing the role of the creator, trying to manufacture things ‘in our own image’ and constructing newly-supposed realities out of the ‘imagination of our hearts’ (Luke 1:51).

The Bible’s word for this age-long human tendency is idolatry. In biblical thinking, idols are false gods created by human beings and worshipped in the place of the one, true, Creator God. As Chris Wright explains:

We create our own gods out of the things that entice us (prestige, glory, wealth), or to ward off things we fear (disease, enemies, bad weather), or to give us the

things we need (crops, fertility, rain, survival beyond death). We exchange the worship of the living Creator God, who deals with all these matters for us according to his providence and will, for whatever we can construct and put in his place for our own happiness and security.<sup>29</sup>

If Trueman is right, we may have to start employing this biblical category. From a Christian perspective based on the Bible, ours is a society marked by idolatry. And, if so, that means the task of the church is not to endorse those idols, bowing down to them and making and make them look respectable, but rather to unmask them and to dethrone them before the name of the world's true King, Jesus Christ.

### **Self-determination and sexual fulfilment**

We may often focus on idols such as money or power, but Trueman's analysis highlights that two of the key idols in

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*TWO KEY IDOLS  
ARE SELF-  
DETERMINATION  
AND THE SEARCH  
FOR SEXUAL  
FULFILMENT*

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Western society today are self-determination and the search for sexual fulfilment.

In our society most people ignore what is going to happen after death. They want happiness in

this life, and they seek to attain it by putting themselves in the place that belongs to God. Rather than seeing their lives as gifts from God to be used for his service and to his glory, they see their lives as belonging to them, and as controlled by them. They are convinced that they should live their lives

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29. Christopher J H Wright, *Here are your Gods!* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2020), Kindle edition Loc 648.

in whatever way they think will bring them happiness. 'I did it my way' has become the anthem of our times.

The search for sexual fulfilment then comes into the picture because, as Trueman explains, since the time of Freud many have come to believe that engaging in sexual activity, as frequently as possible, is a central element of human happiness. Our sexual desires are central to who we are, and so we can only find true happiness by fulfilling them.

As a result, people believe that it is important to try to achieve the goal of sexual fulfilment in whatever way seems good to them – regardless of the traditional teachings of society or organized religion. Sex is no longer seen as something to be undertaken within the limits laid down by God, but rather as something to be undertaken in whatever way 'feels good' to the free, self-determining, god-like, modern individual.

The only absolute limit to sexual activity that is generally recognized in our society is that sexual activity should involve consent. This limit itself fits in with the view of sex previously described because it is intended to ensure that both sides in a sexual encounter are truly acting in a way that they choose rather than being subject to physical or psychological coercion by someone else. Self-determination is still key.

We may not normally think of self-determination and the search for sexual fulfilment as idols. Yet, once we grasp the biblical idea that idols are whatever things people look to as the source of happiness in the place of God, it becomes clear that that is exactly what they are.

## **A Christian response**

If this is how we should understand our society, how should we respond to it in a Christian way? Three avenues of response suggest themselves:

- First, we need to say that the idols of self and sexual fulfilment are false gods and should not be worshipped, because they cannot bring the true happiness for which we are looking – either in this world or in the world to come.
- Secondly, we need to say that in place of the worship of these false gods people should submit themselves to the loving lordship of the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who alone can give real lasting happiness – both in this world and in the world to come – and that such submission entails accepting the sexual identity we have as a gift from God and living it out in the way he has ordained.
- Finally, we need to show that we truly believe this by being willing to live it out in practice, both in what we do and in what we abstain from doing. In Lesslie Newbigin's words the local church congregation that is the 'hermeneutic of the Gospel'.<sup>30</sup> It is only as people encounter their local church as a community that lives what it believes that they will take it seriously and be open to hearing the truth about God and his will for their lives.

We have seen how the early Christians were willing to live in a way that was markedly different from the way their pagan

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30. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), Ch 18.

neighbours lived.<sup>31</sup> The same needs to be true of Christians now. Going back to Jesus' images of salt and light, we can be salt and light only if we are willing to stand out as different. Living in a distinctive way means living as the men and women God created us to be.

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*THE EARLY  
CHRISTIANS  
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NEIGHBOURS*

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So we are to live in accordance with our biological sex and to avoid all forms of *porneia* – being sexually faithful within marriage and sexually abstinent outside it. In this way, the Christian community begins to show that despite their sins, they have been redeemed by Jesus' death and through his resurrection have been raised to a 'newness of life' (Romans 6:4). Indeed they have been given new 'selves', 'created in the image' of their Creator God (Ephesians 4:24).

This is to be truly human. The 'modern self' may appear to have 'risen and triumphed' – as in the title of Trueman's book – but that 'self', biblically speaking, is an 'old self' that needs to die. The 'self' that has been raised and will one day 'triumph' is the 'new self' patterned on the beauty of the 'man from heaven', Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:47; Philippians 3:20–21; *cf.* Romans 5:17).

### **Listening and questioning**

If listening requires immersing ourselves deeply in another's worldview – looking at the world from their perspective and imagining how life feels when walking 'in their shoes' – then this is what we have sought to do. We needed to immerse

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31. Fuller evidence for this early Christian witness can be found in Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods*.

ourselves deeply in the underlying worldview of both the biblical authors and our modern Western culture. So we have done our 'double listening'.

It is time to bring these two worlds together – ancient and contemporary, 'fusing their horizons', as it were. They might appear separated by millennia, but they are not 'worlds apart'. Contrary to the idea that the Bible is ancient, out of

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*THE BIBLE HAS A  
POWER TO SPEAK  
WITH CLARITY*

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date, and far removed from our contemporary world, we find it has a power to speak with clarity. For human nature has not changed. Men and women, despite our educational and technological sophistications, remain the same - created by God for the worship and love of God but with 'hearts that go astray' (Psalm 95:10).

If the apostles Peter and Paul were looking out on our modern world, their message would be remarkably the same: there is a Creator God who has made men and women in his image and has placed them in his created world for his glory. This God has revealed his character, his will and his purpose in the way he created us, in his law and now supremely in his Son Jesus Christ and he desires for us to know him. This God has redeemed his human creatures through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and longs for us to be forgiven, and for his image to be restored in us. He calls us to abandon our worship of, and attraction to, things which have become to us false 'gods' or 'idols' in his place – in our own day, particularly, the gods of self-determination and sexual fulfilment. He is the 'God of all grace' (1 Peter 5:10). As Augustine put it, God has indeed 'created us for himself' and our hearts will be forever 'restless till they find their rest' in him. This God knows that only when these false

gods have been removed from our hearts will we come to know the love and peace to be found in him.<sup>32</sup> Through the gospel, this God is calling out to us to abandon our false loves and to discover him, the very source of love.

The full force of this stream of biblical teaching, consistent, coherent and weighty, needs to be felt. Peter speaks with that full force behind him. God's self-revelation throughout the Old Testament period is now re-energized by the explosive resurrection of Jesus.

We see the same in Paul, as he stands in Athens, dropping the bombshell of this Good News at

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**'DEAR CHILDREN,  
KEEP YOURSELF  
FROM IDOLS'**

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the foundation of the classical world (Acts 17:16–33). We even see it in the apostle John's parting shot as he concludes his epistle with this warning: 'dear children, keep yourself from idols' (1 John 5:21).

Those who respond to this call of God in Christ, will need clear teaching in several key areas:

- about who the true God is and how we can know his will for us his human creatures
- about the idolatrous nature of our society and how to confront this, commending a life based on worship of and obedience to the one true God
- and, in particular, about how we can live in a distinctive way ourselves – living as the men and women God created us to be and submitting to his will over all our lives, including our physical bodies –

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32. Augustine, *Confessions*, XX.

while showing love and support to others who find this way of life difficult

Those of us who find our hearts resonating with the above presentation of biblical theology, and who have been convicted by its truth and authority over our lives, will come to *Living in Love and Faith* with a quite different set of questions from those who dispute this theology – whether in part or in whole. Does the material – the book, podcasts, films and study course – offer clear teaching in these areas, thus helping the church to fulfil its Jesus-given commission to be a ‘light to the world’?

Its architects will object that this was not the purpose of LLF, so it would be churlish to criticize it for failing to accomplish what it never set out to do. Yet the initial proposal from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York was to provide a ‘teaching document’.<sup>33</sup> So the question of what LLF *actually teaches* is not out of place. It serves to highlight what LLF has become: a carefully crafted conversation starter. The question of teaching cannot be indefinitely postponed. Sooner or later the church will need to decide what the church of Jesus can teach in the name of Jesus.

So our question comes round once again: How will the LLF materials help the church to decide what to teach? For those of us convinced of the Bible’s teaching, a further question still hangs in the air. How will LLF’s methodology, which has had to be held up to scrutiny as an ‘impartial examination’, result in something which can help us to be faithful to

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33. The Archbishops’ letter can be found at: <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2017/02/archbishops-of-canterbury-and-york-issue-letter-after-synod-vote.aspx>, accessed 21 February 2021.



apostolic teaching and strengthen the church for its task of mission into the world?



# Chapter 4

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## A theological response: assessing the *Living in Love and Faith* material

In this chapter, we continue our theological response to *Living in Love and Faith* by looking at the LLF material in detail, as follows:

- Positive teaching (identifying three areas of agreement)
- Problems (identifying nine areas of disagreement)
- Other LLF resources

### **Positive teaching**

#### **1. Clarity about who God is**

First, LLF is clear about who God is – he is the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and who became incarnate as Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the traditional Christian teaching about God’s purposes and activity in creation and redemption can be seen clearly, for example in the introduction to the book’s Part Three:

Christians are people who seek to live within, and become defined by, a story – a story which we believe to be true. It is a story drawn from Scripture, reaffirmed in the creeds and celebrated in the liturgies of the church. We try to tell that story in our worship, in our preaching, and in our conversations

and actions in the world. We are constantly learning afresh how to inhabit it in all manner of different contexts. It is a story that begins with God, who in love created humankind in the divine image, so that in communion with one another and with Christ we might mirror God's glory.

It is a story about our rebellion, disobedience and refusal to depend on one another and on God – a disorder which has infected the whole of creation. It is a story of our desperate need for the mercy and love of God in the face of this sinfulness. It is a story about Jesus, who embraced our humanity, lived among us, and gave himself to death for us so that we and the whole of creation could be set free from the bonds of sin, the forces of evil and the judgement we deserve. It is a story of forgiveness, which invites us to repent daily and to reflect the love of God by forgiving others with the same measure with which we have been forgiven by God. It is the story of Jesus rising from the dead and ascending into heaven and interceding for us and for the whole creation. It is the story of the Church – his body on earth – inaugurated by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit among us so that we could experience the power of God's transforming love in our human weakness. It is a story about the end of death and the beginning of eternal life here and now. It is a story of faith in Jesus Christ, of hope in a new heaven and a new earth, and of the transforming power of God's love.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Living in Love and Faith*, 165.

This is a fulsome account. It is supplemented later by a paragraph in Chapter 10 (entitled ‘A story about being human’) which looks at the difficult topic of God’s judgement:

The same God who is said in Scripture to be love is also said to be judge – and God is judge because God is love. God is not indifferent to our distortions, rebellions and betrayals. God’s face is set against them; God’s wrath burns against them. All of human life takes place against this horizon of God’s judgement. Any passion for justice that we experience now, any opposition to the harm that human beings do, any stand against human hatred and enmity, is an anticipation of God’s judgement – and our hope for the triumph of God’s love is at the same time a hope for the enacting of God’s judgement.<sup>2</sup>

It is good to see this biblical theme of judgement brought clearly into the picture. To be sure, the theme is kept at a general level, with no mention of what this means for individuals who may, according to Jesus, be on one of two roads – one leading to ‘life’, the other to ‘destruction’ (Matthew 7:13–14). And, in Chapter 8 (‘A story of love and faith with hope’) apart from one fleeting reference to Jesus talking about judgement on the ‘last day’ (John 12:48), this key biblical theme is noticeable more by its absence.<sup>3</sup> Yet, overall, LLF is clear and orthodox in its teaching about who God is and what he has done.

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2. *Living Love and Faith*, 212.

3. *Living Love and Faith*, 169, and 168–174.

## **2. Clarity about need for distinctive Christian living**

Secondly, LLF is clear about the need for Christians individually and collectively to live a distinctive way of life that reflects the holiness of God who has created and redeemed them. In Chapter 12 ('Story about human ways of loving') we are told that the Christian community:

...is called to live a life together that has a definite character. That is why it requires discipline. This community is called to live a life that echoes and communicates God's holiness. They are called to shine with God's grace, mercy and love. They are called to be obedient together to the demands of this life. And, if they follow this calling, their life together will be distinctive. They will not live as those around them live.<sup>4</sup>

The holy life which this community is called to is a life of 'genuine mutual love' in which all the members of the community 'love one another deeply from the heart' (1 Peter 1.22). 'Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining ... serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.' (1 Peter 4.8-10).

It is this, above all, that will make this community distinctive. It is this that demands transformation of its members' actions, their speech, and their desires. In order to pursue this life, the community will have to turn away from 'all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander' (1 Peter 2.1). Its members will

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4. *Living in Love and Faith*, 221.

have to put behind them the rowdiness and sexual dissipation of their former lives (1 Peter 4.3), in order to be devoted to this godly life. Pursuing this distinctive life will bring this community into conflict with the world around it. Their calling is not, however, to separate themselves from the world around them. They are to 'conduct [themselves] honourably' amongst their neighbours, in a way that will communicate to those neighbours something of the glory of God (1 Peter 2.12). There is no fear of contamination here, but a confidence in Christ's contagious holiness.<sup>5</sup>

This affirmation of the distinctive way of life to which Christians are called is very helpful. The apostle Peter would be pleased, even though he would clearly want clarification on the issue at hand as to what the LLF authors referred in the words 'sexual dissipation'.

### **3. Clarity on orthodox understanding of Christian marriage**

Thirdly, LLF includes a clear re-statement of the orthodox Christian understanding of marriage.<sup>6</sup> It is correctly rooted in the action of God at creation and based on the words of Jesus:

Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Matthew 19.4–6)<sup>7</sup>

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5. *Living in Love and Faith*, 222.

6. LLF, Chapter 3, 'The gift of marriage'.

7. *Living in Love and Faith*, 25.

It then comments:

This is why the church's liturgy describes marriage as 'a gift of God in creation'. It is a gift given to bring life and to give life. God wants us to live fully and offers us ways to live that draw on God's life of love. The joining of a man and woman in marriage is a gift given together with the gift of humanity itself. It is a gift given 'at the beginning' – before God's people Israel were formed, before the law arrived and even before sin came. It is a gift given to all peoples.<sup>8</sup>

On the form of the marriage relationship, the chapter declares:

Marriage's form, as described by Jesus, is the union of a man and a woman, and one that is intended to last for life. That is why the church's 'canons' (its laws), echoing the liturgies which have been heard in our land for centuries, say that 'Marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side'.<sup>9</sup>

The chapter also notes that in the Bible, marriage is used as an image of 'Christ's union with the church, and the final consummation of God's purpose for humanity'.<sup>10</sup> It states that:

God's good gifts of sexual desire and intimacy, with all their power and potential for good and harm, find their proper place and freest space in marriage. Here,

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8. *Living in Love and Faith*, 25.

9. *Living in Love and Faith*, 25 quoting Canon B30.

10. *Living in Love and Faith*, 32.



the 'natural instincts and affections' that God has planted within us are 'hallowed' and to be 'rightly directed' for the purposes of love.<sup>11</sup>

## **Problems**

The positive elements in the LLF book need to be acknowledged – but the less helpful elements must also be recognized. I will outline the following nine areas of concern:

1. Inadequate view of the contemporary world and contemporary science
2. Inadequate view of creation
3. Lack of clarity on the nature and authority of the Bible
4. Inadequate understanding of Jesus' teachings
5. Mistaken evaluation of experience, conviction and culture in the light of creation
6. Failure to address how disagreements about Christian conduct should be resolved
7. Failure to pay attention to the historic mind of the church on identity and sexual ethics
8. Inadequate advice on pastoral care
9. Inadequate view of the role of bishops and episcopal guidance

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11. *Living in Love and Faith*, 33.

## **1. Inadequate view of the contemporary world and contemporary science**

The information given in LLF Chapter 5 about the current state of **British society** – about marriage, divorce, singleness, cohabitation, etc – is factually correct, but LLF fails to reflect on what lies behind the social trends. Britain as a society has increasingly turned its back on God and has turned instead to the idols of self-determination and sexual fulfilment.

It also fails to notice that the sexual revolution that has been the fruit of this growing idolatry has been deeply harmful in its effects. In the words of Glynn Harrison:

...when we stand back and survey the entire landscape of the revolution, we witness injustice heaped upon children, more people than ever living alone, the collapse of marriage among the poor, fatherless wastelands of social deprivation, and the pornographication of childhood.<sup>12</sup>

As Harrison goes on to say, what the sexual revolution in fact gives us is an object lesson in the futility of idolatry:

One of the core messages of the gospel is that idols always ask for more and more, but give less and less until in the end they have everything and you have nothing. And so it is here. The irony is that after the revolution, even as they continue to obsess over their identities, people are not even having more or better sex than before. The core ideas of the revolution – ‘be

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12. Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story* (London: IVP, 2016), Kindle edition, Loc 1654.

yourself; 'find the you within you' – appear to be just another idolatry.<sup>13</sup>

What LLF Chapter 7 says about current developments in **religion** is also factually correct, but again there is no analysis of what lies behind the developments. They reflect the way that secular Western idolatries of self-determination and sexual fulfilment are being promoted around the world; and that changing attitudes towards human identity, sexuality and marriage, both in Christianity and in other religions, are a reflection of this. Western liberal idolatry is increasingly shaping our interconnected and globalized world.<sup>14</sup> This too is side-stepped by LLF.

Turning to what LLF Chapter 6 says about the findings of **science**: there is a one-sided emphasis on the biological origins of same-sex attraction and confusion about sexual identity. This fails to do justice to criticisms of the various theories of biological causation, and to the strength of the evidence for social and psychological influences instead.<sup>15</sup>

The chapter also fails to acknowledge the variety of forms of same-sex attraction and transgender which mean that that causation is probably best seen in specific terms particular to each individual. A one-size explanation will not fit all. Further, the discussion in Chapter 6 fails to note

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13. Harrison, *Better Story*, Loc 1654–1665.

14. For this point see Gabrielle Kuby, *The Global Sexual Revolution* (Briar Noll: Angelico Press, 2015).

15. For an overview see J Alan Branch, *Born This Way? Homosexuality, Science, and the Scriptures* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016), Stanton L Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), Lawrence Mayer and Paul McHugh, 'Sexuality and Gender,' *The New Atlantis*, no 50, Fall 2016, 13–59, Neil and Briar Whitehead, *My Genes Made Me Do It! - Homosexuality and the Scientific Evidence* (Whitehead Associates, 2020).

that causal influences do not negate free will and individual responsibility. Whatever the influences upon them, in the last instance people *choose* whether to engage in same-sex sexual activity, to identify as transgender, and to go through gender transition.<sup>16</sup>

Serious flaws have been identified in the study cited in LLF as showing that the effects of gender transition are beneficial.<sup>17</sup> LLF fails to take seriously the studies that call into question whether gender transition procedures have any benefit at all.<sup>18</sup> Under the heading ‘Sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts’, LLF dismisses sexual orientation change efforts or ‘conversion therapies’ as ‘both ineffective and potentially harmful’.<sup>19</sup> LLF’s analysis ignores:

- the evidence that such efforts are found beneficial by a good number of people
- the fact that there is no convincing evidence that change therapy is always harmful
- the moral issue of it being wrong to take away people’s freedom to seek help to change, or to

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16. For these points see Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015) and Branch, *Born This Way?*

17. For these criticisms, see Nathaniel Blake, ‘What We Don’t Know: Does Gender Transition Improve the Lives of People with Gender Dysphoria?’ *The Public Discourse*, 30 April 2019 at <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/04/51524/>, accessed 21 February 2021.

18. See, for example, Ryan Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), Ch 5, and Ryan Anderson ‘“Transitioning” Procedures Don’t Help Mental Health, Largest Dataset Shows,’ *The Heritage Foundation*, 3 August 2020 at <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/transitioning-procedures-dont-help-mental-health-largest-dataset-shows>, accessed 21 February 2021.

19. *Living in Love and Faith*, 118.

manage their feelings and desires, if that is what they desire to do<sup>20</sup>

More generally, the chapter does not acknowledge that even without specific change efforts, people's sexual attraction can be fluid, changing over the course of their life for a variety of reasons. This means that the idea that the world can be neatly divided into 'gay' and 'straight' – or 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' – is a big mistake. The world is more complicated than that.<sup>21</sup> This means, for instance, that if someone has engaged in same-sex sexual activity on one or more occasions it does not make them 'gay.' There are people who are primarily sexually attracted to those of the same sex, but they cannot simply be identified with all those who have ever engaged in same-sex activity.<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, the chapter fails to acknowledge that attributing mental (and physical) health issues faced by LGBTQI+ people to 'minority stress' has been challenged. For if this were the case, one would expect a reduction of these lesbian issues in more LGBTQI+ accepting societies, while that is not the case.<sup>23</sup>

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20. See, for example, Belinda Brown, "The Unscientific Roots of Bans on "Conversion Therapy", Mercator Net, 11 November 2020 at <https://mercatornet.com/unscientific-roots-of-conversion-therapy-ban/68137/> and the material on the website of the Core Issues Trust at <https://www.core-issues.org/>, both accessed 21 February 2021.

21. See Jenelle Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011).

22. In terms of traditional Christian ethics, this means that we need to make a distinction between the habitual sin of someone who identifies as 'gay' and embraces a sexually active gay lifestyle, and the occasional fall from grace of someone who engages in one-off or occasional same-sex sexual activity. Both are forms of sin, but they are different forms of sin, and wise pastoral care will involve responding to them differently.

23. See for example J Michael Bailey, 'The Minority Stress Model Deserves Reconsideration, Not Just Extension,' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol 49, 2020, 2265–2268.

AS LLF says, Christian engagement with the modern world needs to involve engagement with the findings of science, but LLF's account of the findings of science is one-sided and misleading. It does not aid Christian thinking about the causes of people's feelings of sexual attraction and sexual identity, and the best way to respond to these.

## **2. Inadequate view of creation**

LLF Chapter 15 highlights the importance of what we learn from creation when thinking about what it means to be human, and how to live rightly before God as a human being. But the fundamental truth of creation is not taken sufficiently seriously: namely that, like other species of animals which God has created, humanity is a dimorphic species – divided biologically into males and females. From this we can deduce two important principles:

- Being male or female is not a choice, nor a feeling, but a biological reality that cannot be changed, even when people undergo gender transition procedures.
- Male and female human beings are biologically designed to have sexual intercourse with members of the other sex; and this is the God-ordained means of conceiving children.<sup>24</sup>

The existence of people with intersex conditions (also known as 'variations of sex development' or 'differences in sex development') does not challenge this basic truth for two reasons:

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24. For the scientific evidence for the division of humanity into two distinct biologically determined sexes, see Anderson Ch 4 and Debra Soh, *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2020).

- The vast majority of intersex conditions do not call into question whether someone is male or female.
- Even in the tiny percentage of people in whom elements of both sexes are present (and whose sex is therefore genuinely ambiguous), they do not constitute a third type of human being. They are people in whom some form of developmental ‘disorder’ has occurred which has prevented them from developing as male and female in the normal way intended by God for his human creatures. The reason for saying that a ‘disorder’ has occurred is because the physical characteristics that make people intersex have no good purpose of their own and prevent the ends that human sexual differentiation is meant to achieve – namely sexual intercourse and sexual reproduction (See Anderson, Chapter 4.)

All this is relevant to what it means to be human, and to live rightly before God as a human being. All this is relevant to what it means to be human, and to live rightly before God as a human being. For, as even the disordered forms of sexual development that lead to the existence of intersex conditions testify, God has created human beings as male and female; and so to respect and honour God’s creative activity, we are called to live as members of the sex we have been created to be. It is not our role to attempt a new work of creation. Our role is to receive what we have been graciously given and to grow to maturity within the framework of what God has given. As Oliver O’ Donovan states:

The sex into which we have been born (assuming it is physiologically unambiguous) is given to us to be

welcomed as the gift of God. The task of psychological maturity – for it is a moral task, and not merely an event which may or may not transpire – involves accepting this gift and learning to love it, even though we may have to acknowledge that it does not come to us without problems. Our task is to discern the possibilities for personal relationship which are given to us with this biological sex, and to seek to develop them in accordance with our individual vocations. Those for whom this task has been comparatively unproblematic (though I suppose that no human being alive has been without some sexual problems) are in no position to pronounce any judgement on those for whom accepting their sex has been so difficult that they have fled from it into denial. Nevertheless, we cannot and must not conceive of physical sexuality as a mere raw material with which we can construct a form of psychosexual self-expression which is determined only by the free impulse of our spirits. Responsibility in sexual development implies a responsibility to nature – to the ordered good of the bodily form which we have been given.<sup>25</sup>

If so, seeking to live as a member of the opposite sex from our own, or seeking to adopt some other form of alternative sexual identity, is not only an attempt to achieve the impossible, since we cannot in fact escape the sex we were born into; it is also an act of rebellion against God our Creator. Our bodily form, and hence our sex, is a good given to us by God.

God has created and designed us to have sex with the opposite sex. The very way we are made teaches us that to

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25. Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), 28–29.



engage in same-sex sexual activity is to act in a way that is contrary to God's good will. If something is 'contrary to nature', then it is contrary to God himself. As Paul writes in Romans 1:26–27, lesbian and gay sexual activity is 'against nature'. Thus, although people may feel that it is right, their bodies are clearly telling them otherwise.

These two deductions from creation are basic to a biblical worldview. Yet they are overlooked and never established within LLF. This makes it impossible for LLF to build a true contemporary Christian debate about human sexual identity and behaviour.

### **3. Lack of clarity on the nature and authority of the Bible**

LLF Chapter 13 reminds its readers what Anglicans have traditionally believed about the Bible.

Anglicans believe that the Bible is, in a classic phrase, 'God's Word written', and that God works through our reading of it.

We believe these humans' words are words inspired by God (2 Timothy 3.16) and that we can hear God speak to us through them.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, the chapter then undercuts this clear affirmation by setting out seven different views of the nature and authority of the Bible. It sets out the various views in a very fair way, but it does not reach an overall conclusion, leaving the reader with the impression that any of the approaches mentioned might be acceptable.

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26. *Living in Love and Faith*, 275.

What it fails to note is that only the first three approaches are compatible with the historic position of the Christian church, rooted in the teaching of Jesus' himself,<sup>27</sup> that the Bible, both as a whole and in all its parts, gives us a clear, consistent, and authoritative message from God about what we should believe and how we should live.

Seven texts concerning same-sex sexual relationships are looked at in the chapter (Genesis 19, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, and 1 Timothy 1:8–11). Contrary to what is suggested in the chapter, these texts are clear in their prohibition of all forms of same-sex sexual activity and not just some forms of it, and do not 'open the possibility of approving faithful, committed same-sex relationships'.<sup>28</sup> They are not outliers that can be separated from the message of the Bible as a whole. On the contrary, they are the consistent outworking of the Biblical belief that God has created the world and humanity in a certain way and that he calls his people under both the old and new covenants to live in accordance with this fact and to abstain from forms of behaviour that are not in accordance with it.

All these points are clear in the Bible, and have been consistently affirmed by the Christian church in all its

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27. See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1973).

28. See Michael Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?* (Lake Mary: Front line, 2014); Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), Ch 4; Martin Davie, *Studies in the Bible and same-sex relationships since 2003* (Malton: Gilead Books 2013); Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001); and Ian Paul, *Same-sex Unions: The Key Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2014).

29. See S Donald Fortson III and Rollin Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The consistent Christian teaching on homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

various branches for the whole of Christian history up until the last sixty years.<sup>29</sup> However, as in the case of the witness of creation, the LLF book lacks clarity when it comes to applying them to the modern Christian debate about human sexual identity and behaviour.

#### **4. Inadequate understanding of Jesus' teachings**

While LLF Chapter 12 looks at Jesus' teaching on sexual ethics, it fails to note that Jesus' rooting of sexual ethics in the creation narrative, the fact that he did not reject the teaching of the Old Testament law on sexual ethics, but rather intensified it by including desire as well as action (Matthew 5:27–30) and took a stricter line on divorce (Matthew 19:3–12); and the fact that his condemnation of *porneia* (Mark 7:14–23) would have included a condemnation of same-sex sexual activity within its scope, means we have to conclude that, like other Jews of the second Temple period, Jesus regarded same-sex relationships (of whatever type) as contrary to the will of God.<sup>30</sup> Any other view of the matter does not do justice to the historical evidence.<sup>31</sup>

Can we be Christians and disagree with what Jesus taught about same-sex relationships? If we ask what repentance and discipleship involved, we are led back to Jesus' rigorous sexual ethic.<sup>32</sup> Jesus welcomed the outsider and the outcast,

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31. For these points see, for example, Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Ch 3, and John Nolland, 'Sexual Ethics and the Jesus of the Gospels,' *Anvil*, vol 26 no 1, 2009. It is also worth noting the point made by Andy Angel in his book *Intimate Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2017), Ch 4 that John deliberately uses language with homoerotic overtones in his account of the Last Supper in John 13 in order to make the point that the Greek ideal of an intimate relationship between men finds its fulfilment not in homosexual activity but in sharing in the eternal love between Jesus and his heavenly Father.

32. For the rigorous implication of discipleship in the teaching of Jesus see Andy Angel, *The Jesus you really didn't know* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

including those rejected by his society because of their sexual misbehaviour, but it is impossible to separate Jesus' call to follow him and his welcoming of sinners, from a call to repentance and discipleship (see Matthew 16:24–25, Mark 1:15, Luke 5:32, 19:1–10).

If Jesus required from his first disciples an obedience to his sexual ethic that involved a rejection of same-sex relationships, on what basis might it be suggested that this requirement does not apply to the church today? How can the church take a different approach from its Lord, whom we worship as God incarnate? This question is not raised in LLF.

### **5. Mistaken evaluation of experience, conviction and culture in the light of creation**

LLF Chapter 17 rightly says that our beliefs will be shaped by our experiences. But it does not address the issue of how we determine when our experiences have led us to believe things that are true, and when they have led us to believe things that are false.

We need to be as self-aware as possible, thinking critically about our experiences, informed by God's revelation of himself in creation and the Bible and assisted by the voices of other Christians. This is, at a personal level, the classic Anglican methodology of discerning God's will for the church: through the witness of Scripture, tradition and reason. So we review our experiences in the light of how God created his human creatures as male and female and ordained marriage as the setting for sexual intercourse, procreation and the raising of children. We need to keep reinterpreting our experiences in this light, to stay aligned in our thinking and behaviour.

It is right that the Encounters sections should draw attention to what people have to say about their experiences. Engaging with other people needs to involve listening so that we understand the personal basis on which they approach issues. But it does not mean we should accept what they say uncritically. We need one another's help to interpret our experiences and we need to have the intellectual tools, honed by biblical truth, to evaluate what we hear from others. The LLF book does not provide such tools.

In addition, while due regard has to be given to people's conscientious convictions (as the church has accepted ever since Paul wrote on this topic in Roman 14:1–23 and 1 Corinthians 8:1–13, 10:23–33), Chapter 17 fails to note that such convictions cannot be legitimate grounds for doing things that are objectively wrong. Someone may be profoundly convinced that they are meant to be in a relationship with a person who is married to somebody else, but their action would be adultery, and therefore wrong. One can multiply such examples. The fact that people believe it is right to be in a same-sex relationship, or to be transgender, does not mean this is morally legitimate, nor that the church should make accommodation for their convictions.

The LLF book should have made this point and then discussed why the witness of creation and the Bible mean that that the church should not accept such convictions.

LLF Chapter 16 is right when it says that Christians need to engage with surrounding culture, and it is also right when it warns that this a complex process. In the end, the chapter just ends up saying 'it's all very difficult' rather than providing any theological principles to guide such engagement. What it should have done is explore how

Christians should understand and engage with culture, using the twin witness of nature and the Bible as their starting point, and then apply this approach in relation to the matters being discussed. The sexual permissiveness of our culture, as observed earlier, is the outworking of a turning from God to idolatry. As such, it is something that Christians should challenge rather than accept or adopt.

What is said about the developing Anglican approach to polygamy in Chapter 16 is correct as far as it goes. However, it fails to make the critical point that this development did not involve any fundamental change in Christian ethics, or to the church's understanding and practice of marriage. It simply asked how best to apply Christian teaching in way that did not have the unintended consequence of harming vulnerable people – women and children now abandoned by their husbands and fathers, and left destitute. What needs to be highlighted, and what LLF fails to highlight, is that there is thus no analogy between this development and the acceptance of same-sex relationships or the introduction of same-sex marriages, since the latter would involve a fundamental change in Christian sexual ethics and in the church's understanding and practice of marriage.

## **6. Failure to address how disagreements about Christian conduct should be resolved**

LLF Chapter 10 is correct when it says that there are 'deep disagreements' in the Church of England:

...about whether certain aspects of human experience, in the areas of gender and sexuality, are to be viewed as reflecting the goodness and God-given diversity of humans as created in God's image, or as marks of

the brokenness of that created image which God is working to restore<sup>33</sup>

LLF Chapters 11 and 12 are likewise correct when they say that the overarching question facing the Church of England is ‘Which patterns of life are consistent, and which inconsistent, with God’s holiness? (And that the current disagreements are about ‘the specific disciplines’ to which Christians are called and ‘the ways in which those disciplines work for people in different situations.’)<sup>34</sup>

The problem is that having made these points the chapters then fail to say how these issues should be resolved. What they ought to have gone on to say is:

- that same-sex sexual attraction and difficulties with accepting one’s given sexual identity are a result of creation’s brokenness rather than its diversity
- that engaging in same-sex sexual activity or adopting a transgender identity are inconsistent with the holiness to which God calls his people
- that the basic disciplines to which all Christians are called are to live as the men and women God created them to be and to avoid *porneia* by abstaining from all forms of sexual activity outside marriage, including all forms of same-sex sexual activity
- that such disciplines are particularly to be observed by those who are called by God to ordained or

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33. *Living in Love and Faith*, 217.

34. *Living in Love and Faith*, 234 and 258.

licensed lay ministry since ministers are called to be particularly exemplary in their way of life

By failing to make these points the LLF book contributes to the current confusion in the Church of England. The impression given is that different opinions on these matters may have equal validity.

### **7. Failure to pay attention to the historic mind of the church on identity and sexual ethics**

LLF Chapter 14 points to the need to pay attention to the 'mind of the Church'. This 'mind' is made known to us through the Creeds and other documents from the history of the Church that are accepted as theologically authoritative, as well as through discussion and consultation. We need to take counsel together to address difficult and divisive issues, just as Christians have done from the earliest years of the Church's existence.

However, the chapter fails to acknowledge that the historic mind of the church is clear about the basics of human identity and sexual ethics. As we have noted, it is only in the last sixty years that the church has begun to doubt that sex is meant to take place only within heterosexual marriage. The church's historic rule has been simple: sexual faithfulness within heterosexual marriage and sexual abstinence outside it. If due weight is to be given to the Christian tradition, this must be taken into account. Very good grounds would have to be given for saying we now know that this rule is wrong (grounds which the LLF book fails to offer).

The chapter also fails to acknowledge that the decisions of the councils of the church carry weight only if they



are in agreement with Scripture, and not otherwise. So Christians in the Church of England should take note of the conciliar decisions of other churches only if it can be shown that these decisions are in line with Scripture. Thus, the decisions of the Episcopal Church or the Church of Sweden to allow same-sex marriages to be celebrated in their churches should carry no weight for the Church of England unless these decisions can be shown to be biblical. As Article XXI notes, councils ‘may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God’ and biblical teaching is the measure for determining whether this has been the case.

### **8. Inadequate advice on pastoral care**

While the LLF book covers a wide range of issues, there are other important issues relating to ‘identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage’ that are not discussed. Thus, there is no exploration of whether the Church of England’s current disciplines with regard to contraception, divorce and re-marriage are theologically correct; and there is no discussion of the ethical issues relating to cohabitation, masturbation, pornography, prostitution, sex-surrogacy, and treatments for infertility. In addition, there is no discussion of what it might mean for those people with intersex conditions, whose sex is genuinely ambiguous, to live rightly before God.

As was the case with the shared conversations of 2014–2016, the focus of the LLF book is on the issue of same-sex sexual relationships, with limited coverage of the issues of transgender and intersex. It is important to discuss these issues – but it is not acceptable for the LLF book to ignore other issues to do with ‘identity, sexuality, relationships and

marriage' that affect the lives of the large majority of people who are not same-sex attracted or transgender.

In addition, the LLF book is silent on the key issue of how to care pastorally for those struggling in the areas of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. What should appropriate pastoral care by clergy and congregations look like in these cases? That is something people need to know, and the book gives no help in this regard.

### **9. Inadequate view of the role of bishops and episcopal guidance**

LLF Chapter 14 book quotes the words of the 1662 Ordinal which describe the role of the bishop as being to 'banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same' (p 318). It then goes on to explain this as meaning that:

Bishops will, collectively, look at how deeply the pattern of teaching in the church as a whole is sending down roots into the Bible, how richly it is informed by the Christian tradition, how attentive it is to what we know of the natural world, and how seriously participants in it are engaging with their mission context and with one another's deep convictions. They will look at how well the church is encouraging, resourcing, and making use of those who do have formal and informal teaching roles. They will make judgements about how present teaching relates to the limits that earlier generations of the church have identified as necessary to protect the overall health of the Christian faith. (p 319)

There are two problems with this:

- First, it fails to make clear that the responsibility of the bishops to counter ‘all erroneous and strange doctrine’ is not only a collective responsibility, but an individual one. Each individual bishop has a personal responsibility before God to do this, regardless of what his or her fellow bishops do (or fail to do).
- Secondly, it fails to make the basic point that bishops are called to take action to banish ‘all erroneous and strange doctrine.’ They themselves have to clearly and publicly reject it, and they need to do all in their power to make sure it is not propagated, and does not take root in that part of the Church of England for which they are responsible.

Not only does the LLF book fail to give a proper account of the *role* of the bishops, but it *is itself* an example of the bishops failing to perform that role. The call to ‘banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine’ would here mean taking action to counter the acceptance of gender transition, same-sex marriages, same-sex sexual relationships and all other forms of sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage. In the LLF book, the bishops fail to take this action. Nowhere in the Foreword, or in the Appeal, or the Invitation, or in the rest of book (for which they are also ultimately responsible), do they use Scripture as a benchmark to say these things are wrong, and that Christians should not think or teach otherwise, or act as if they were not wrong. In regard to LLF, the bishops have not properly fulfilled their episcopal responsibilities. They have not done what they are called to do.

An example of the sort of action the bishops should have taken has been issued by the College of Bishops of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) in a Pastoral statement on 'Sexuality and Identity'.<sup>35</sup> This statement responds to the need 'for greater clarity regarding pastoral ministry to those who self-identify as Christians and who are same-sex attracted' by addressing three questions:

- What should our biblical and pastoral response be to those within our church who self-identify as Christians with same-sex attraction?
- What is the biblical vision for transformation with regard to same-sex attraction?
- What is the most helpful language to employ in describing the reality of same-sex attraction?

This statement is clear, orthodox and pastorally helpful, and properly fulfils the episcopal calling to provide teaching for the faithful in a way that highlights the failure of LLF in this regard.

Having considered these nine areas of concern, we will now consider the other LLF resources.

## **Other LLF resources**

### **The LLF Course**

The five-session LLF course forms a summary introduction to the main ideas in the LLF book with questions for individual

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35. The statement from the ACNA College of Bishops can be found at <https://anglicanchurch.net/sexuality-and-identity-a-pastoral-statement-from-the-college-of-bishops>, 19 January 2021, accessed 21 February 2021.

reflection or group discussion. As such, its strengths and weaknesses mirror those of the book. It will help people to begin to understand what the current debate in the Church of England is about, but it does not give its participants the information they need to make proper decisions about these matters. As with the book, the big problem is that it does not start in the right place and move out from there.

As we have seen, the correct starting point for thinking about identity, sex and marriage is the truth revealed in nature and Scripture. The fallenness of the world means that we all struggle

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to live in the light of these truths, but this does not mean that we are free as individuals to reject them, or that the church can say people do not have to live by them. We can't understand ourselves without a grasp of the Fall in Genesis 3.

The LLF course, then, fails to give a properly truthful perspective on the matters under debate. Like the book, it fails to recognize that there are other important issues concerning sex, relationships and marriage other than the two issues of same-sex relationships and transgender.

### **Podcasts and films**

The podcasts and films are good ways of understanding discussions that took place in LLF and that led to the LLF book, and the real-life stories that underly the current debate in the Church of England on identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. As with the LLF book, no tools are provided to help people assess the various arguments offered in the podcasts, or to think theologically about the stories told in the films.

## **LLF library**

The same problem exists with the hundreds of items available through, or listed in, the LLF library. People will need help to know what to read, and how to think critically about it, and to decide what is true and what is not. LLF offers no such help. No responsible college tutor would simply point their students to the college library and say, 'Go on then, make sense of that lot' – and yet that is effectively what LLF is doing with its library.

There is some excellent material available through the LLF library such as, for instance, Andy Angel's paper 'Unity, Division and Living in Love and Faith as the Church of England' and Chris Wright's paper 'How does God communicate through the canon of Scripture?'<sup>36</sup> But without guidance of the sort that LLF itself does not provide, there is no way to identify this kind of material, and to distinguish it from other material which is erroneous and unhelpful.

## **Conclusion**

If we ask whether the LLF resources provide the guidance that Christians need in order to know how to live in a way that maintains a faithful and distinctive Christian witness in today's society the answer, unfortunately, is 'no.' To see why, it is worth returning to what was said earlier in this book about the teaching that Christians in this country require in order to live out their missionary calling by being salt and light in our society. We need clear teaching about:

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36. Available at <https://llf.churchofengland.org>, accessed 21 February 2021 (registration required).

- who the true God is, and how we can know his will for his human creatures
- the idolatrous nature of society and how it is manifested in the way people behave
- what to say to others about why such behaviour is to be rejected and why a life based on worship and obedience of the one true God is to be embraced instead
- how to live in a distinctive way and how to show love and support to others who find living in this way difficult
- what living in a distinctive way involves, and would look like

The LLF resources give help with the first half of the first point. Those who want help with the rest need to look elsewhere.

We have asked what visitors from Mars might have made of the life of the early church. If these same visitors were to return to Planet Earth today, they might be puzzled about how much the church had changed since their visits in the first and second centuries.

Reviewing the LLF materials from a distance, they might conclude that the church of Jesus Christ was now very confident about something called modern science, but very unconfident about its own story and unsure about how to use its own textbook. Far from the church being a community with a distinctive and unparalleled ethic

of love, standing strong and confident in the face of a cynical culture, it might seem instead on the precipice of capitulation to that culture, and about to let its ethic of love be diluted and dissipated.

The visitors' view from afar needs to be heeded, but what might be said in response is that the very purpose of LLF was to put all the church's issues, problems and complexities on the table in a clear and charitable manner. The LLF process was not concerned making decisions, but rather with amassing a range of evidence from which decisions can be made.

However, this response highlights the central problem with LLF: according to its own constrained purposes, it cannot decide on the issues it addresses and therefore cannot say what it needs to say. It can raise all the right questions, but it cannot proffer an answer.

The fundamental problem with LLF is this: it fails to acknowledge a clear pattern of sexual identity and

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behaviour in Scripture, endorsed by Jesus himself, and supported by what nature teaches us. This clear pattern is reflected in the church's traditional teaching and practice, but has been rejected by those who wish to bring change (or, in the case of transgender, have already brought change about). The way forward for the Church of England is to uphold (or, in the case of transgender, to return to) this pattern.



The point is not that there was a golden age in the past in which everyone lived according to the tenets of traditional Christian sexual ethics. This was not the case in the first century and has never been the case. In every age there have been professing Christians who have fallen into sexual sin. But today an increasing number of people in the church (including even bishops) deny that what the Bible calls sin really is sin, or are at best equivocal. The challenge for faithful Christians in our age is to work to re-gain that clarity about sin. LLF fails to say clearly what needs to be said, and feeds the confusion.



# Chapter 5

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## The traditional Anglican view of Scripture and *Living in Love and Faith*

### **‘The mouth of the Lord has spoken’**

Since the fundamental problem with LLF lies in its failure to acknowledge a clear pattern of sexual identity and behaviour in Scripture, it is vital that we explore the validity of taking God’s word as our ultimate source of wisdom and authority. This chapter examines the LLF material in the light of the traditional Anglican evangelical view of the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture as God’s word written. We look at:

- The authority of Scripture – how should we understand the authority of Scripture?
- Scripture and human sexuality – how does the authority of Scripture relate to the issue of human sexuality?
- *Living in Love and Faith* and the authority of Scripture – does the LLF material accept the authority of Scripture in the area of human sexuality?

## **The authority of Scripture**

### **How we know God**

The most basic task for the theologian is to answer the epistemological question, 'How do we know God?' Answers to all the other theological questions depend on it. Questions such as 'What is God like?' 'What has he done?' 'How does he want his human creatures to respond to what he has done?' 'What can we hope for from God in the future?'

According to the Bible, the answer to the question 'How do we know God?' is that we know him on the basis of revelation. Rocks, plants and historical artefacts do nothing to help us know about their existence. But God takes the initiative in making himself known to us. His action in revealing himself to us precedes, and is the basis for, our knowledge of him.

The agent of revelation is God himself, the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the content of revelation is likewise God himself. In revelation, God himself makes himself known to us. That revelation is an act of God which God himself chooses to make because of his merciful love towards his human creatures.

God reveals himself in four main ways.

First, through the world that he has made. In the words of Paul:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. (Romans 1:19–20)

Secondly, through the innate sense of right and wrong which is present in the heart of every human being, and which testifies to the goodness of God and his opposition to all that is contrary to his good purposes even in the case of those people who do not think about God, or even reject his existence.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, in his acts in history, such as the call of Abraham, the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the giving of the law to Israel on Mount Sinai, the establishment of Israel in the land of Canaan, the exile to Babylon and the subsequent return and rebuilding of Jerusalem and its Temple, and most importantly the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the sending of the Holy Spirit, through which God's intention to bring about saving fellowship between himself, his human creatures and creation as a whole was finally fulfilled.

Fourthly, through the words of Scripture (also referred to as 'the Bible'). As Michael Nazir-Ali notes, 'the divine positive law revealed in the Bible ... affirms, corrects, confirms and clarifies'<sup>2</sup> the revelation given through creation and through the human sense of right and wrong by making known who God is, and what he requires of his human creatures; by describing the human need for salvation; by providing a permanent written record of God's saving acts in history; and by pointing forward to the final completion of God's good purposes in the life of the world to come.

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1. For this point, see C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Fount, 1984), Ch 3–5.

2. Michael Nazir-Ali, *Faith, Freedom & The Future* (London: Wilberforce publications, 2016), 273–274.

In the words of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in his homily, 'A fruitful exhortation to the reading and knowledge of Holy Scripture':

...in holy Scripture is fully contained, what we ought to do, and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God's hands at length. In those books, we shall find the Father, from whom, the Son, by whom, and the Holy Ghost, in whom, all things have their being and conservation; and these three Persons to be but one God, and one substance. in these books, we may learn to know ourselves, how violent and miserable we be; and also to know God, how good he is of himself; and how he communicateth his goodness unto us and to all creatures. We may learn also in these books, to know God's will and pleasure, as much as for this present time is convenient for us to know.<sup>3</sup>

### **The nature of Holy Scripture**

If we say that God reveals himself in Holy Scripture in this way, this begs the question of what we mean by Scripture. The answer given by the Church of England since the Reformation is that the term Scripture means the collection of sixty-six books contained in the Old and New Testaments, the books running from Genesis to Revelation.

The reason for this answer is twofold.

In the case of the Old Testament, the thirty-nine books concerned are those which constituted the Jewish canon

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3. Thomas Cranmer, 'A fruitful exhortation to the reading and knowledge of Holy Scripture,' in Ian Robinson (ed), *The Homilies* (Bishopstone: The Brynmill Press, 2006), 5.

of Scripture and which the New Testament tells us were accepted as Scripture by Jesus and by the Early Church. The only difference between the Jewish canon and the Anglican Old Testament canon is that the order of the books differs in the two canons, and that in the Jewish canon the twelve minor prophets constitute one book.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the New Testament, its twenty-seven books are those written either by the apostles appointed by Jesus himself to be his authorized witnesses, or by those associated with the apostles such as Mark, Luke or James. These books came to be recognized from the first century onwards as having the same scriptural status as the books of the Jewish Canon.<sup>5</sup> As J I Packer notes:

When in the mid-second century the Church began formally to define the limits of its New Testament canon, it seems that the process involved no more than the explicit recognition of an established state of affairs. It was not a case of imparting to a newly-made collection of books an authority which they had not had before, nor of reminding a forgetful generation what authority the earliest Christians had ascribed to apostolic writings. What evidence there is suggests that it was simply a case of settling the limits of a class of books whose authoritative character had never been in doubt; and that it needed doing, not

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4. For the evidence for this point see Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1984). As Article VI of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* notes, the Church of England holds that the Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books which were contained in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the *Septuagint*, but which were not in the Hebrew Canon can be 'read for example of life and instruction of manners' but are not to be regarded as doctrinally authoritative.

5. Thus 2 Peter 3:16 refers to Paul's writing as Scripture and 1 Timothy 5:18 does the same with the Gospel of Luke.

so much because the churches were omitting to use the books they should, as because some were using books they should not. The criterion for this task seems to have been a simple historical one; which books are in fact apostolic (ie apostolically written or authorized)?<sup>6</sup>

It is often suggested that the New Testament Canon, as we now have it, was invented by Athanasius in the fourth century. This is not the case. Athanasius' *Festal Letter* to his churches at Easter AD 367 does contain a list of canonical New Testament books which is exactly the same as the list of New Testament books accepted by the Church of England today, but this list was not a new invention. At the beginning of the third century, Origen had already given the same list in one of his homilies with no suggestion that his list was in any way novel or controversial.<sup>7</sup> All that Athanasius' letter indicates is that the doubts that had been raised by some concerning Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John had been settled in favour of their acceptance as canonical.

And if we ask why these books became accepted, the answer is that they had come to be seen as genuinely apostolic. The church believed that it had reliable historical information about which works had been produced by the apostles and those in their circle. So the debates that took place around the limits of the canon concerned whether, in the light of this information, a small number of books which most accepted, but some doubted, really were apostolic in that sense and therefore could be read as Scripture in church.

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6. J I Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 65–66.

7. Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 135–41.



What Athanasius' letter tells us is that by the time he wrote, this debate had been put to bed!

It could, of course, be argued that the early church misunderstood the evidence that it had and that the books of the New Testament were not produced by those in the apostolic circle. However, two hundred years of intensive critical study has not shown this to be the case. The evidence we have tells us that the decision made by the early church was the right one.<sup>8</sup>

From the earliest records, Christians have described the sixty-six books which make up Scripture as being, both individually and collectively, God's 'word'. In the words of Article XX, they have been seen as 'God's word written.' As Packer explains, there are two reasons why this has been the case.

The first is the divine inspiration of Scripture:

Jesus and his apostles always treat Scripture as the utterance of God through the Holy Spirit, transmitted by the agency of men [sic] whose minds God moved in such a way that in all their composing they wrote just what he wanted as their contribution to the text and texture of the full Bible that he planned. The Bible's quality of being thus completely shaped by God, so that it may and must always be read as God testifying

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8. Helpful discussions of the matter can be found in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), Don Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) and Andreas Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum and Charles Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009).

to himself through the testimony to him of the human writers, is its *inspiration*.<sup>9</sup>

The second reason that the sixty-six books are recognized as God's word is because they reveal God's mind to us.

Packer again:

The second reason for calling the Bible God's Word is its divine ministry of revealing God's mind to us as the Holy Spirit gives us understanding of what its text says, and thus makes us 'wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (see 2 Timothy 3:14–17). This quality of thus communicating knowledge of God, of his grace, and of his Son, is the Bible's *instrumentality*. Your word is formally the utterance that proceeds from your mouth and substantially the expression and communication of your mind, and so it is with Scripture as the Word of God: formally, more than a million words strung together, substantially, God's inexhaustible, Christ-centred, salvation-oriented, self-revelation to us. The Bible is both God-given and God-giving, and as such it stands as the standard of Christian faith.<sup>10</sup>

To put it simply, Scripture is God's word because it is his self-communication – first to the writers of the books of Scripture and then, through their words, to us, giving us understanding of God, ourselves, and God's will for us in the ways described by Archbishop Cranmer. To quote Isaiah 40:5, through Scripture 'the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

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9. J I Packer, *Taking God Seriously* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), Kindle edition, Loc 231.

10. Packer, *Taking God Seriously*, Loc 231–242.

There are three further points to note concerning the Bible as God's word.

### **1. Scripture is entirely truthful**

In John 17:17, Jesus is praying to God and states succinctly, 'thy word is truth'. This saying applies equally to God's written word in Scripture. This point about the truthfulness of Scripture has been expressed by saying that the Bible is 'infallible' and 'inerrant'. As Timothy Ward notes:

The idea that the Bible is 'infallible' means that it does not deceive. To say that the Bible is 'inerrant' is to make the additional claim that it does not assert any errors of fact: whether the Bible refers to events in the life of Christ, or to other details of history and geography, what it asserts is true.<sup>11</sup>

If we deny either Scripture's infallibility or its inerrancy, we then have to say either that God is capable of deception and error, or that only parts of Scripture are the words of God.<sup>12</sup> We therefore have to say with the thirteenth-century theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas: 'It is unlawful to hold that any false assertion is contained either in the Gospel or in any canonical Scripture, or that the writers have told untruths.'<sup>13</sup>

The belief that the Bible is entirely truthful has been accepted by orthodox Christians throughout the history of

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11. Timothy Ward, *Words of Life* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 132.

12. A helpful study of the meaning of the terms infallibility and inerrancy and why they necessarily belong together can be found in Packer, *Taking God Seriously*, 94–101.

13. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae. cx.3, quoted in G R Bentley, *The Resurrection of the Bible* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1940), 85.

the Church and continues to be maintained in orthodox statements of faith today. Thus, the Church of England Evangelical Council's basis of faith refers to the Bible as the 'wholly reliable revelation and record of God's grace, given by the Holy Spirit as the true word of God written'.<sup>14</sup> The Doctrinal Basis of the Evangelical Tyndale Fellowship declares that 'The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God.'<sup>15</sup>

## **2. Scripture's literary form consists of a series of texts that together form one overarching text**

The texts of Scripture are its sixty-six books. Each contains material that has, under divine inspiration, been joined together to form a literary whole. This matters because it means we need to read individual verses and chapters in the light of the whole message of the book in which they are situated. We have to read the parts in the light of the whole. The text of Scripture is the overarching message it conveys when read as a whole. Just as God caused the creation of the biblical books, so also he caused these books to be brought together into a single canon of Scripture.

A good analogy would be a multi-volume literary work such as J R R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. This consists of three parts, 'The Fellowship of the Ring', 'The Two Towers' and 'The Return of the King'; structurally, it is divided into six books. Each of the three parts, and each of the six books, can be read and make sense on their own, but to understand the meaning and message of the *Lord of the Rings* each part

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14. The Church of England Evangelical Council, 'Basis of Faith' at <http://www.ceec.info/basis-of-faith.html>, accessed 21 February 2021.

15. Tyndale House, Doctrinal Basis at <https://academic.tyndalehouse.com/doctrinal-basis>, accessed 21 February 2021.

and each book has to be considered in the light of *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole.

Furthermore, the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture referred to above means that there can be no contradiction between the different parts when these are rightly understood. If there were such a contradiction, it would mean that one or both of the texts concerned were wrong and therefore misleading and, as we have seen, the divine inspiration of Scripture means that this is not an idea that we can entertain.

### **3. The overarching text consists of a single story,**

accompanied by a commentary on that story

The story is about how God created a good world and appointed human beings to rule over it on his behalf; how under the influence of the devil, human beings rebelled against God and started worshipping idols, thus subjecting themselves and all creation to physical and spiritual corruption and death; and how God, through his mighty acts in history, put right all that had gone wrong and made it possible for human beings and creation as whole to exist in his presence for all eternity. This story is told in the Old Testament in the books from Genesis to Esther, and in the New Testament in the Gospels, Acts and Revelation.

### **Using the commentary to grasp the whole**

The story's commentary is found in the Old Testament wisdom books from Job to the Song of Solomon, and in the prophetic books from Isaiah to Malachi; and in the New Testament epistles from Romans to Jude. This commentary provides insight into the meaning of the story, and explains what it means to live in the light of it.

To read the Bible rightly means to read the story and the commentary together, allowing each to inform our understanding of the other. Consider the following three examples:

- To understand the story of Jesus' crucifixion, we have to understand it in the light of Isaiah's prophecy about the suffering servant (Isaiah 52:13–53:12); and, conversely, we cannot understand Isaiah's prophecy rightly until we see how Jesus' crucifixion fulfilled it.
- We cannot understand what happened at Pentecost until we understand it in the light of Joel's prophecy of God's pouring out of the Spirit in the last days (Joel 2:28–32); and conversely, we cannot understand Joel's prophecy rightly until we understand how it was fulfilled at Pentecost.
- Paul's teaching about dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6:1–11) makes sense only in the light of the story of Jesus' death and resurrection recorded in the Gospels; and, conversely, what Paul writes in Romans helps us to better understand the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection for how we should live.

### **Why Scripture has authority**

Scripture has authority because the story it contains, and the commentary on that story, are inspired by God and therefore entirely truthful; and because what we are told in the story and the commentary is true for all human beings. Human beings, whatever their sex, race or social status have been created by God, rescued by God from corruption and death and are invited by God to share eternity with him in the new world that is coming, by dying and rising with Christ

through faith and baptism, and by living out the new life that the Holy Spirit makes possible.

We also learn from Scripture, and nowhere else, what is involved in living out our new life in the power of the Spirit. If we want to live rightly as God's creatures now, and to be happy with God forever in the world to come, then we have to bow to the authority of Scripture, accepting the truth and relevance of the story that it tells, and allowing our lives to be shaped by what it tells us about how we should live.<sup>16</sup>

This idea that Scripture is a text before whose authority we need to bow goes against the grain of our culture. Our culture emphasizes that freedom is to be desired above all things and that freedom consists in our determining for ourselves how we should live.

From a Christian perspective, what our culture sees as freedom is in fact bondage, bondage to idolatry, false desires and vanity. By contrast, the service of God, enabled by obedience to God's word given to us in Scripture, brings perfect freedom because through it we become free to fulfil the law of our being by living as the people God created us to be.

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16. To quote the Anglican theologian, John Webster, 'Modern accounts of freedom identify freedom as unfettered liberty for self-creation, and therefore contrast freedom and nature: freedom is the antithesis of the given, a move against and beyond any sense that I have a determinate identity. Evangelical freedom, by contrast, does not envisage being human as an utterly original making of life and history. Rather, to be human is to live and act in conformity to the given truth (nature) of what I am – a creature of grace, a reconciled sinner and caught up in the movement of the ways and works of God in which I am pointed to a perfection to be revealed in the last times. I am free as I find myself finally unencumbered by idolatry, false desire and vanity, and therefore enabled to fill out, actively to occupy and expand the role to which I am appointed. In evangelical freedom I am set free for reality, and thus for the practices of holiness.' John Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM, 2003), 94.

## Scripture and human sexuality

When we study the *story* told in Scripture and its *commentary* on this story, we discover, in the words of the American theologian Michael L Brown, that, ‘the Bible is a heterosexual book.’<sup>17</sup> What he means by this statement is that Scripture is a text in which the norm for sexual relationships is a marital relationship between a man and a woman, and the basis for procreation and family life is likewise marriage between a man and a woman. As Brown goes on to say:

...this is the pattern throughout the entire Bible in book after book.

Every reference to marriage in the Bible speaks of heterosexual unions without exception, to the point that a Hebrew idiom for marriage is for a man ‘to take a wife.’

Every warning to men about sexual purity presupposes heterosexuality, with the married man often warned not to lust after another woman.

Every discussion about family order and structure speaks explicitly in heterosexual terms, referring to husbands and wives, fathers and mothers.

Every law or instruction given to children presupposes heterosexuality, as children are urged to heed or obey or follow the counsel or example of their father and mother.

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17. Michael Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?* (Lake Mary: Front Line, 2014), 88.



Every parable, illustration or metaphor having to do with marriage is presented in exclusively heterosexual terms.

In the Old Testament God depicts His relationship with Israel as that of a groom and a bride; in the New Testament the image shifts to the marital union of husband and wife as a picture of Christ and the Church.

Since there was no such thing as in vitro fertilization and the like in biblical times, the only parents were heterosexual (it still takes a man and a woman to produce a child) and there is no hint of homosexual couples adopting children.

The Bible is a heterosexual book, and that is a simple, pervasive, undeniable fact that cannot be avoided, and, to repeat, this observation has nothing to do with a disputed passage, verse or word, it is a universal, all pervasive, completely transparent fact.<sup>18</sup>

If we ask why Scripture sees heterosexual relationships as the norm, the answer that Scripture gives us is that it is because this is how God created things to be.

Study of human nature shows us that, just like other animals, human beings are divided into two sexes, male and female. What makes us male or female is the way that our bodies are configured for the purposes of sexual reproduction. As Professor Christopher Tollefsen writes:

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18. Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?*, 88–89.

...our identity as animal organisms is the foundation of our existence as selves. But fundamental to our existence as this animal is our sex. We are male or female organisms in virtue of having a root capacity for reproductive function, even when that capacity is immature or damaged. In human beings, as is the case with many other organisms, that function is one to be performed jointly with another human being; unlike the digestive function, no individual human being suffices for its performance.

Accordingly, reproductive function in human beings is distributed across the two sexes, which are identified by their having the root capacity for one or the other of the two general structural and behavioural patterns involved in human reproduction. In male humans, this capacity is constituted by the structures necessary for the production of male gametes and the performance of the male sex act, insemination. In females, the capacity is constituted by the structures necessary for the production of oocytes and the performance of the female sex act, the reception of semen in a manner disposed to conception.<sup>19</sup>

There are other physical and psychological differences between men and women.<sup>20</sup> However, they are all characteristics of human beings who are differentiated by the fact that their bodies are ordered towards the

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19. Christopher Tollefsen, 'Sex identity,' Public Discourse, 12 July 2015, text at <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/07/15306/>, accessed 22 February 2021. Toffefsen is Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Carolina.

20. See for example, Richard A Lippa, *Gender, Nature and Nurture*, 2ed, London: Routledge, 2005.

performance of different roles in sexual reproduction, and in the nurture of children once they have been born.<sup>21</sup>

Scripture affirms the truth that there are two sexes, as Brown indicates. However, in Genesis 1:26–31 and Genesis 2:18–25, Scripture gives us additional teaching about our existence as men and women – teaching which provides the foundation for everything else that it says about human sexual identity and behaviour.

From these two passages we learn five key things:

- First, the division of human beings into two sexes is not an evolutionary accident. It is how God, in his infinite wisdom and goodness, has created human beings to be: ‘male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1:27).
- Secondly, like everything else created by God, the division of humanity into two sexes is something that is good. ‘And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good’ (Genesis 1:31).

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21. It is true that transgender activists would deny that a person's biology is the correct basis for classifying them as male or female. Thus in a recent American court case, Dr Deanna Adkins from the Duke University Medical School testified that gender identity is ‘the only medically-supported determinant of sex.’ In her view ‘It is counter to medical science to use chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia, or secondary sex characteristics to override gender identity for purposes of classifying someone as male or female.’ To put it simply, according to Dr Adkins, who people identify as being is the only thing that truly distinguishes them as male or female. This is clearly untrue. Someone with male biology may identify as a woman, but unlike someone with female biology, he will be liable to get prostate cancer, will never have a period and will never be able to bear a baby. The basic biological differences between men and women are clear and ineradicable.

- Thirdly, it is as male and female that human beings are the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ of God (Genesis 1: 26–27). For human beings to exist as the image and likeness of God means that they have the capacity to know and love God, each other, and creation as a whole, and the vocation to rule over creation on God’s behalf. However, they can only exercise this capacity and fulfil this vocation as men and women acting together. That is why God says in Genesis 2:18, ‘it is not good that the man should be alone.’
- Fourthly, there is a correspondence between the existence of human beings as male and female and the life of God himself. As the plural verb in Genesis 1:26 indicates (‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’), God exists as three divine persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – who possess both identity and difference. They are identical as God, but different in the way they are God. As Genesis goes on to say, God has made human beings as persons who are likewise marked by both identity and difference. The identity and difference between men and women (identical in their humanity, differentiated by their sex) is the primary form of this human identity and differentiation from which all other forms of identity and difference then flow.
- Fifthly, by creating the first man and woman and then bringing them together in marriage (Genesis 2:22–23), God established the model for human sexual relationships for all time. As the American Old Testament scholar Richard Davidson notes, the introductory word ‘therefore’ in Genesis 2:24 ‘indicates that the relationship of Adam and Eve

is upheld as the pattern for all human sexual relationships.<sup>22</sup>

According to this pattern, the context for sexual intercourse is a permanent marital relationship between one man and one woman that is outside the immediate family circle, is freely chosen, is sexually exclusive and is ordered towards procreation in accordance with God's command that men and women should 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1:28).

Everything else which Scripture says about sexual identity and behaviour presupposes these five points. What is said about sexual conduct in the Old Testament law is based on this teaching in Genesis 1 and 2 and the same is also true of the teaching about sexual conduct found in the New Testament.

It is true that in the New Testament Jesus teaches that marriage as we now know it will cease in the world to come, where we shall be 'as angels' (see Matthew 22:23–33). However, there is no suggestion in the New Testament that this fact abrogates the pattern for sexual relationships established in Genesis 2.

It is also true that the New Testament teaches that we become children of God, not through sexual reproduction but through faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:12–13). However, this does not cancel God's command in Genesis 1 to 'be fruitful and multiply', since God's will that people should become his sons and daughters through faith can only be fulfilled if those same people have been born into the world as a result of sexual reproduction. It is for this reason that the

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22. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 43.

church has always insisted that procreation continues to be one of the purposes of marriage.

### **Same-sex relationships**

It is because God has created human beings in the way that he has, that Scripture consistently sees same-sex sexual relationships (in common with all other forms of extra-marital sexual activity) as contrary to God's will. It is true that there are only a small number of passages in Scripture that specifically refer to same-sex sexual activity: Genesis 19, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Deuteronomy 23:17–18, Ezekiel 16:49–50, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, 1 Timothy 1:10 and Jude 7. However, three points need to be borne in mind in relation to this fact:

First, the teaching of these passages is consistent in the way it regards all forms of same-sex sexual activity as contrary to the will of God, because it is contrary to the order for human life established by God at creation, and incompatible with being a member of God's people.

Secondly, rejection of same-sex sexual activity is also included in those many passages in the New Testament that warn against *porneia* (for example Mark 7:21, Acts 15:20, 1 Corinthians 6:18 and Ephesians 5:3) since *porneia* was a catch-all term which included all forms of sexual conduct ruled out under Old Testament law, same-sex sexual activity included.

Thirdly, the small number of passages that directly mention homosexual activity does not mean that avoiding such activity was unimportant for the writers of Scripture. Brown writes:

Let's say you buy a new cookbook featuring healthy dessert recipes, none of which uses sugar. In the introduction to the book the author explains her reasons for avoiding sugar products, telling you that you will find sumptuous, sweet dessert recipes – but all without sugar. And so, throughout the rest of the book, the word 'sugar' is not found a single time – not once! Would it be right to conclude that avoiding sugar was not important to the author? To the contrary, it was so important that every single recipe in the book makes no mention of sugar.

It is exactly the same when it comes to the Bible and homosexuality. There are a very few strong, very clear references to homosexual practice – every one of them decidedly negative – and then not a single reference to homosexual practice throughout the rest of the Bible. Was it because avoiding homosexual practice was not important to the authors of the Scriptures? To the contrary, the only relationships that were accepted in God's sight or considered normal for society were heterosexual relationships, so homosexual practice was either irrelevant (because it had nothing to do with the God ordained relationships of marriage and family and society) or, if mentioned, explicitly condemned.<sup>23</sup>

As Brown goes on to say, the important issue is not simply the teaching of those passages which explicitly mention same-sex sexual relationships, rather 'The issue is the testimony of the entire Bible.'<sup>24</sup> As Brown says, the Bible

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23. Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?*, 84.

24. Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?*, 105.

is a 'heterosexual book' and according to Scripture's own testimony this is because God created human beings to be heterosexual people, that is to say, people who have sex with members of the opposite sex in the context of marriage. That is the template established at Eden that all subsequent generations of human beings are meant to follow, and that is why same-sex relationships are wrong in all circumstances in the same way that all forms of extra-marital sexual relationships are wrong.

### **Transgender**

If we turn to the issue of transgender, there are two reasons why not living as member of one's given biological sex is wrong from a scriptural standpoint.

The first reason is, once again, the teaching of the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. These narratives teach that human beings are made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27) as beings who have material bodies made from 'the dust of the ground' (Genesis 2:7). According to Genesis it is the entire person, body and soul together, who is created by God. In the words of the twentieth-century German theologian Gerhard von Rad in his commentary on Genesis: 'one will do well to split the physical from the spiritual as little as possible: the whole man is created in God's image.'<sup>25</sup> This means, as Martin Luther puts it in his *Small Catechism*, that accepting the teaching of Genesis means believing 'that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind.'<sup>26</sup>

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25. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM, 1972), 58.

26. Luther, *Small Catechism*, text in Mark Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 68.



Furthermore, these narratives (and Scripture as a whole) also teach that human beings are created by God as male and female with a vocation to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1:28), a vocation that is to be fulfilled in the context of the ‘one flesh’ sexual union of marriage (Genesis 2:24, 4:1). Human beings fulfil this vocation according to the ways that their bodies have been created

– with those with male bodies fulfilling it as fathers, and those with female bodies fulfilling it as mothers. So it makes

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*IT MAKES NO  
THEOLOGICAL SENSE  
TO SEPARATE SELF  
AND BODY*

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no theological sense in the light of the Genesis creation narratives to separate self and body, to have a female self and a male body, or to claim that those with male bodies can be mothers.

In addition, Luther’s reminder that God has not just created the world in general, but our particular form of existence means that we have to acknowledge that there are limits to the extent to which, to quote the American transgender writer Justin Tanis, we are ‘called to be artisans of our own lives and bodies.’<sup>27</sup> The starting point for our shaping of our lives has to be the grateful recognition that we have been created by God as part of a dimorphic sexual structure within which human beings exist as embodied creatures who are determined by their biology as either male or female.

In the words of the theologian and ethicist Oliver O’Donovan:

The dimorphic structure, with its orientation towards permanent heterosexual union, is the generically

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27. Justin Tanis, *Trans-gendered, Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 182.

given foundation for our individual sexual vocations. The first obligation of every human being is to hail that created givenness as a created good and to thank God for it, even though he or she may then have to acknowledge that for him or her in particular this created good has taken on the aspect of a problem.<sup>28</sup>

The problem with transgender from this perspective is that it involves a rejection by a particular individual of the 'created givenness' of their bodily existence. It means saying that that which God has made and declared to be good is in fact not good, thus rejecting the authority of what God has said.

The second reason, which can be found in Deuteronomy 22:5, is that **transgender goes against the biblical teaching** that we should live as the members of the sex that God has given to us.

The teaching in Deuteronomy prohibits cross-dressing on the grounds that 'to dress after the manner of the opposite sex was to infringe the normal order of creation which divided humanity into male and female.'<sup>29</sup> It can also be found in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 where Paul tells the Corinthians that men should follow the dress and hair codes which proclaim them to be male, and women the codes which proclaim them to be female because 'God's creation needs humans to be fully, gloriously and truly human, which means fully and truly male and female.'<sup>30</sup>

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28. Oliver O'Donovan, *Transsexualism: Issues and Argument* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2007), 19–20.

29. P J Harland 'Menswear and Womenswear: A Study of Deuteronomy 22:5,' *Expository Times*, 110, no 3, 1988, 76.

30. Tom Wright, *1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2003), 143.

This does not mean that we should uncritically embrace the gender stereotypes of any society. What it does mean is that we should live in a way that proclaims to that society the truth of God's creation of human beings as male and female by living as the man or woman God made us to be. Adopting a transgender identity means not doing this.

Those who are transgender would claim that they *are now* living as the people God made them to be. However, they can say this only by making a separation between their 'true selves' and the sex of their bodies in a way that goes against the scriptural teaching that God has made his human creatures as unions of bodies and souls.

If all this is what Scripture teaches in relation to human sexuality, then accepting the authority of Scripture means accepting this teaching as having been given to us by God himself and then being willing to act in accordance with it.

## ***Living in Love and Faith* and the authority of Scripture**

Now we turn to look at whether the LLF material accepts the authority of Scripture in principle, and whether it then goes on to accept and apply its teaching concerning human sexuality. I have nine areas of concern.

### **1. LLF fails to ascribe to Scripture the God-given authority that it asserts**

First, having already visited Chapter 13 of LLF, let's look at it again, in more depth. We are told that:

Anglicans believe that the Bible is, in a classic phrase, 'God's Word written', and that God works through our

reading of it. We believe these humans' words are words inspired by God (2 Timothy 3.16) and that we can hear God speak to us through them.<sup>31</sup>

This statement is in accordance with the nature of Scripture. But *Living in Love and Faith* fails to properly ascribe to Scripture the God-given authority that it asserts.

In Chapter 13 of LLF, we find seven views on the unity and authority of Scripture through the voices of seven imaginary speakers, as follows:

**Speaker 1:** I believe that God loves us enough to have given us a manual for living. By the grace of God, the Bible is truthful, without error, and clear. Everything we need to know for our salvation, and to live holy lives pleasing to God, is right there on the page. We simply need to read it, and obey it – and that includes all that it says about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. Most of what people mean when they talk about ‘interpreting’ the Bible is one attempt or another to avoid listening to its plain teaching.

**Speaker 2:** I agree that the Bible tells us what we need to know in order to understand God’s loving purposes for us. It is given to us by our Creator, who knows all about what is good for us, and who wants to communicate that to us. We can trust such a God to have spoken to us clearly and coherently – and I think that the answers the Bible provides to our questions, including our questions about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, are indeed clear and

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31. *Living in Love and Faith*, 275.

coherent. I do want to stress, however, that we need to read everything that the Bible says about marriage and sexual relationships, that we need to pay attention to each text's historical context, and that we need to read them in the context of the Bible's wider message, in order to find a trustworthy framework or blueprint for our thought and practice.

**Speaker 3:** I broadly agree, but I want to stress the care we need to take in putting the pieces of biblical teaching together – and the danger of taking any part on its own. God has given us the Bible as a whole, expecting us to learn from the interaction of all its parts. Sometimes one text qualifies another, or shows that another was giving guidance only for a specific context, or helps us see that another was revealing only part of the truth. God invites us to the labour of reading all the relevant texts together. It is only when we do so – and especially when we read all of the Bible in the light of Christ's work and teaching – that we will find the answers we are looking for.

**Speaker 4:** I like your stress on taking care as we put the different parts of the Bible together, but I want to say more about it. I don't see that task as simply one of resolving difficulties, or finding ways to smooth out the Bible's rough edges. I think there are deep and pervasive tensions in the Bible, and that they are there for good reason. It is an inherently complex conversation between multiple voices. I think that we need to acknowledge those tensions, explore them, go on learning from them, and dwell with them, as we think through our questions about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. In fact, I think God invites

us to this kind of dwelling with the text. I think the Bible is too complex, too mobile, and too lively to be called a blueprint or a framework.

**Speaker 5:** I agree that God has given us the Bible as a whole, expecting us to learn from and dwell with the interaction of all its parts, but I want to push what you say a bit further. I think that when we read all the relevant biblical texts together, we do discover that some of them, taken by themselves, are misleading. Listening to the Bible as a whole means learning to discern what is more central to it, and what is less central – and I think God expects us to make that discernment. For example, when we do that, I think we find that some of what we read in the Bible about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage just doesn't line up with the most central things the Bible says about love. So I think the Bible itself teaches us not to take those passages as instructions for our lives now, and to find some creative new way of reading them.

**Speaker 6:** I would want to push that even further. I believe the Bible is given to us for the one purpose of teaching us about God's love for the world – especially its fulfilment in Jesus. I want to say that the Bible is a collection of human words brought together by God to witness to that love, and ultimately to Christ. Everything in it is given to us for that one purpose. I do trust that God has provided us with witnesses whose testimony is sufficient to teach us this love. But I also think that the testimony is provided by fallible human voices, all of which need testing against that central message. I believe the Bible calls us to work out our own answers

to our questions about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, in the light of this central message. And I expect that the answers we give to specific questions will sometimes be quite different from the answers that the biblical authors gave, because we no longer agree with some of the other assumptions they brought to the process – and that we will therefore have to say ‘no’ to some of their answers.

**Speaker 7:** I agree that the Bible is a collection of fallible human voices, but I’m wary of what you say about God bringing these texts together, and giving them to us for some central purpose. I do think that it is a book produced by people who were caught up in movements of God’s Spirit in history – but their words only do uneven and partial justice to what they glimpsed. You can certainly find some important truths in Scripture, sometimes powerfully and beautifully expressed, but they are mixed in with all kinds of other material, some of it horrific.<sup>32</sup>

The chapter goes on to discuss the pros and cons of each view, but no view is rejected as unacceptable. We are told that the views of the first and seventh speakers go beyond the ‘mainstream of the church’s conversation about the Bible’s authority and purpose’.<sup>33</sup> However, we are not told that either is wrong. This is a serious problem because only views 1–3 are compatible with a proper view of the nature of Scripture.<sup>34</sup> Views 4–7 suggest there are irreconcilable tensions within Scripture; that parts of Scripture are misleading; that we need to say ‘no’ to some of the things that its authors say; that it is

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32. *Living in Love and Faith*, 295–97.

33. *Living in Love and Faith*, 298.

a collection of ‘fallible human voices’; that only some things in the Bible are important, while others are ‘horrific.’ Each of these claims runs counter to the truth that Scripture brings in all its parts a coherent, unified, truthful, message from God, to which we are bound to submit.

## **2. LLF fails to note the serious nature of what Scripture teaches about sexual ethics**

Secondly, LLF fails to note the serious nature of what Scripture teaches about sexual ethics and the fact that this should bring in ‘not only a chastening word to the revisionist theologians but also a thoroughgoing revolution for almost all Christians.’<sup>35</sup> The erosion in trust in Scripture has been gradual. While there is still debate about same-sex relationships and transgender, most people in the Church of England are now generally comfortable with accepting divorce and heterosexual sexual activity outside marriage, and all methods of birth control. LLF ought to have made clear that, from a biblical perspective, all forms of sexual activity outside marriage, and even the desire for such activity, is sinful; that divorce is contrary to God’s will and is only ever permissible in the case of adultery and desertion; and that the use of birth control outside marriage is a serious moral issue, both because, from the scriptural

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34. Chapter 13 comments that the view of the first speaker ‘seems to deny – or at least to give very little attention to – the humanity of the text. The rich and varied lives and contexts of the Bible’s human authors, and the rough texture that their voices give to the text, seem to be washed out in the glare of this speaker’s claims about God’s authorship of these words’ (LLF, p 298) This comment is unfair since in fact nothing is said in the quote from the first speaker that denies or ignores the humanity of the text. Saying that the text is God-given and is therefore ‘truthful, without error and clear’ does not rule out the human authorship of Scripture, either directly or by implication.

35. Christopher Roberts, *Creation and Covenant* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 246.



perspective, marriage, sex and procreation are meant to be linked together, and also because forms of contraception that involved the destruction of embryos go against the scriptural prohibition against the taking of innocent life.<sup>36</sup>

If LLF had taken the authority of the scriptural witness seriously, it would have pointed to the need for revolutionary and radical change in the church's thinking, teaching and practice a change that would mean re-visiting the church's approach to sexual ethics from the 1960s.

### **3. LLF fails to evaluate contemporary British society in the light of scriptural teaching**

Next, LLF fails to evaluate contemporary British society in the light of scriptural teaching. LLF notes the state of contemporary British society, but what it does not do is to note that the reason it has moved away from traditional Christian patterns of sexual conduct is because it has adopted a false view of freedom. That is to say, it has come to believe that freedom is about 'the unfettered liberty for self-creation' rather than accepting the scriptural view of freedom as our being set free from the bondage of sin to live in the way that God created us to live.<sup>37</sup>

In scriptural terms, British society has succumbed to the temptation to try to decide for itself the nature of good and evil, rather than submitting to what God has to say about the matter. The widespread rejection of Christian sexual ethics is merely a symptom of this. To put the matter most starkly, British society has become increasingly unwilling to let God be God.

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36. For more detail on these points, see Martin Davie, *Glorify God in your Body* (London: CEEC, 2019).

37. See John Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM, 2003), 94.

LLF has failed to note this.

#### **4. LLF fails to acknowledge that Scripture is clear in its rejection of same-sex relationships**

Fourthly, LLF fails to acknowledge that the Scripture passages it considers in Chapter 13 are clear in their rejection of same-sex relationships.<sup>38</sup> It states:

Until relatively recently they were universally and uncontroversially read as consistently rejecting all same-sex sexual behaviour. We have seen, however, that some now question this and interpret them as more narrowly focused, so leaving open the possibility of approving faithful, committed same-sex relationships.<sup>39</sup>

While ‘some’ now interpret them in this way, it does not mean that they are right to do so. The texts concerned have been subject to intense scrutiny from biblical scholars over the last sixty years and the result of this scrutiny has been to show that the traditional reading is correct. In the words of the liberal American scholar, Luke Johnson:

The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says ... we do in fact reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority, when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good.<sup>40</sup>

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38. LLF Ch 13 considers the following texts: Genesis 19, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, and 1 Timothy 1:8–11.

39. *Living Love and Faith*, 294

40. Luke Johnson, ‘Homosexuality & the Church’ at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1>, 11 June 2007, accessed 21 February 2021.

When we read the texts in their immediate historical and canonical contexts, and in the light of the overall view of human sexuality set out in Scripture, the only conclusion to draw is that they leave no room for the acceptance of faithful and committed same-sex relationships. However faithful such relationships may be, in scriptural terms they are still *porneia* because they fall outside the pattern of sex within heterosexual marriage laid down by God at creation.<sup>41</sup>

### **5. LLF fails to state whether same-sex sexual relationships are compatible with Christian discipleship**

In a related move, a fifth concern is that LLF leaves open the question of whether same-sex sexual relationships are compatible with Christian discipleship and whether the church should bless them or celebrate same-sex marriages. This is a matter on which Scripture has spoken, both by setting out a consistent sexual ethic from Genesis 1 and 2 onwards in which the only legitimate setting for sexual activity is within marriage between one man and one woman, and by implicitly or explicitly declaring that such relationships are off limits for God's people.

To use Brown's terminology, it has failed to reflect properly on the significance of the fact that the Bible is an exclusively heterosexual book.

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41. See Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?*; Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, Ch 4; Martin Davie, *Studies in the Bible and same-sex relationships since 2003* (Malton: Gilead Books 2013); Kevin De Young, *What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality?* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015); Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001); William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Ian Paul, *Same-sex Unions: The Key Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2014); and Donald Wold, *Out of Order* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

## **6. LLF fails to acknowledge Scripture's teaching that God made us male and female**

LLF describes the transgender phenomenon, and notes the Church of England's authorized services to mark people's gender transition. It fails to acknowledge the teaching of Scripture about how God has made his human creatures to be male and female, and calls them to live their lives in the light of this fact. This rules out any idea that people can claim a sexual identity that is contrary to their biological sex, or that it is legitimate for the church to give credence to any such claim through its liturgy. In the words of Martin Luther, Scripture tells us that God 'wills to have his excellent handiwork honoured' and acceptance of transgender identities is incompatible with this.<sup>42</sup>

## **7. LLF fails to apply Scripture's call to exclude those who persist in ungodly behaviour**

LLF acknowledges that Scripture calls for the exclusion of those who persist in visibly ungodly forms of behaviour, but fails to apply this to the issues of same-sex relationships and transgender.

## **8. LLF fails to acknowledge that sexual ethics are not simply a matter of preference**

Conversely, while it draws attention to passages such as Romans 14 which give teaching about how to handle disagreements among believers in matters that are *adiaphora* (in other words, matters of indifference or preference), it fails to acknowledge that matters of sexual ethics do not fall in this category.

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42. Martin Luther, 'The Estate of Marriage' quoted in Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 245.

## **9. LLF fails to evaluate science, experience and people's convictions in the light of Scripture**

Finally, when LLF considers sources of guidance for the Church of England, it fails to acknowledge that the findings of science, people's experiences and people's conscientious convictions all need to be evaluated within the authoritative theological framework that Scripture provides. This explains why there is no guidance in LLF for how to undertake such an evaluation.

To summarize, when we ask the question, 'Does the LLF accept the authority of Scripture and apply its teaching to the area of human sexuality?' we note the following:

- it fails to ascribe to Scripture the God-given authority that it asserts
- it fails to note the serious nature of what Scripture teaches about sexual ethics and the fact that this should bring in a chastening word to the revisionist theologians and a thoroughgoing revolution for almost all Christians
- it fails to evaluate contemporary British society in the light of scriptural teaching
- it fails to acknowledge that Scripture is clear in its rejection of same-sex relationships
- it fails to state whether same-sex sexual relationships are compatible with Christian discipleship and whether the church should bless them or celebrate same-sex marriages

- it fails to acknowledge the teaching of Scripture about how God has made us to be male and female, and how he calls us to live their lives in the light of this fact
- it fails to apply its understanding of Scripture's call to exclude those who persist in visibly ungodly forms of behaviour to the issues of same-sex relationships and transgender
- it fails to acknowledge that sexual ethics are not simply a matter of preference or indifference
- it fails to acknowledge that the findings of science, experience and people's conscientious convictions need to be evaluated in the light of Scripture's authoritative theological framework

## **Where we must land**

Accepted Anglican teaching reflected in Canons A5 and C15 states that the Creeds, the Church of England's historic formularies and decisions made by the councils of the church carry authority only because they bear faithful witness to theological truths made known in Scripture. So it follows that it would be contrary to Anglican theological method if the Church of England were to make any decisions that failed to bear a similar faithful witness.

It is important, as LLF says, for the Church of England to pray and seek God's guidance. But the Church of England does not need to ask God what his will is for human sexual identity and ethics. He has already made it known through

Scripture. The church should rather pray for the Lord's help in becoming more faithful in its life and witness in this area.

It might perhaps be argued that items 2–9 in this list of failings do not involve a rejection of the authority of Scripture, but rather a failure to interpret and apply Scripture properly.

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*THERE IS A FAILURE  
TO INTERPRET AND  
APPLY SCRIPTURE  
PROPERLY*

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God's intent in giving us Scripture is so we may know him and his will properly, and act in obedience to it. When we fail to read Scripture properly, that is to say, when we understand it in a way that is contrary to how God meant it to be read (either because we don't attend carefully to what the biblical text says, or because of the influence of the prejudices that we bring to the text), we fail to take God's authorial authority seriously. Likewise, when we fail to apply the teaching of Scripture either in our own lives, in the life of the church, or in our involvement in the wider world, we fail to take its God given authority seriously.

In summary, we have to accept the authority of Scripture. That is, to acknowledge that its sixty-six books form a consistent and truthful text, which God has caused to be written by its human authors, to communicate what we should believe about God, ourselves, and the world in which we live, and how we should act as his people. We must read it in the way God intended it to be read, and apply it in our own lives, and in the life of the church and the world. LLF's lack of clarity about the nature of Scripture is at the heart of its inadequacy.





# Chapter 6

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## Where do we go from here?

Finally, we look at the question ‘Where do we go from here?’ from two different perspectives:

- The next steps for the Church of England – what will happen in the Church of England following the publication of the LLF material?
- The next steps for biblically-grounded Anglicans – what should ‘we’ do to express our convictions within the life of the Church of England following the publication of LLF?

### **The next steps for the Church of England**

As explained in Chapter 1 of this book, a process of discernment will take place across the Church of England as whole. Informed by this process, the Next Steps Group, chaired by the Bishop of London, will bring recommendations to the House of Bishops. The House of Bishops will formulate a set of specific proposals before the end of 2022. These will then go to the General Synod to be debated and voted on.

According to LLF this process has four main goals.

- That the Church of England should seek to attain the kind of unity Jesus prayed for in John 17:21 by becoming ‘one in love and obedience and holiness,

so that the world may find the knowledge of Christ as Saviour and the peace of God in the experience of God's Kingdom.' (p x)

- That, as Jesus fed the crowd in John 6, so today 'God will provide the nourishment we need to better understand God's purposes in relation to human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.' (p 2)
- That those in the Church of England will 'learn and discern together so that right judgements and godly decisions can be made about our common life.' (p 422)
- 'that the Holy Spirit will use these learning resources to open a way for us to find our deepest convictions about Jesus Christ also affirmed by those who we presently disagree with.' (p 422)

At the time of writing, it is unclear how the discernment process will be conducted in parishes, deaneries and dioceses, and by what process the Next Steps Group and the House of Bishops will discern what God is saying to the Church of England. Much work lies ahead before the House of Bishops can formulate proposals to go to General Synod.

The 'Living in Love and Faith next steps' page of the Church of England website tells us:

Congregations are diverse, so there is no single model for using the resources. It will be important for churches to work out what is best in their particular circumstances. Church communities might choose to use the LLF resources in midweek small groups, for example, or as part of a Lent series, or on special

away days. The resources could also be used by PCCs, deanery gatherings or clergy conferences and diocesan synod meetings. They might be used in lay leadership training contexts as well as in the context of ministerial or discipleship programmes.

Churches will also need to decide when is the best time for this engagement, in the light of their yearly pattern of activities and, especially, in the light of the uncertainties raised by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Engagement will need to be during 2021 so that processes of discernment and decision-making can take place in 2022.<sup>1</sup>

What we *do* know is that the timetable is very tight. Because churches are still grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic and will be seeking to re-establish a new pattern of activities once the restrictions from the pandemic are eased, there won't be time for a thorough engagement with, and reflection upon, the LLF resources before the end of 2021.

We also know that the only way the four goals of the Next Steps process can be achieved is by a return of the Church of England as a whole to the traditional Christian beliefs that God has created people to live as men and women according to the sex of their bodies and to engage in sexual intercourse solely in the context of life-long marriage between one man and one woman.

The reason for this is because, as we have seen in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this book:

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1. 'Living in Love and Faith next steps' at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/living-love-and-faith-next-steps>, accessed 21 February 2021.

- unity in ‘obedience and holiness’ involves people living in the way God created them to live
- better understanding ‘God’s purposes in relation to human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage’ means better understanding that he created people to live in this way
- ‘right judgements and godly decisions’ about the life of the Church of England will be judgements and decisions that lead people to live in the way God created them to live
- the ‘deepest convictions’ of those who accept biblical teaching will involve a belief that people should live in the way that God created them to live; and they will find these beliefs affirmed by those with whom they currently disagree only if these people come to accept this belief

While the LLF material comes across with great winsomeness, it can obscure the clarity of scriptural teaching. Christians with less knowledge of the Scriptures, and who rely on LLF as their guide, will be led into confusion.

## **Four next steps for biblically-grounded Anglicans**

### **Why we must engage with LLF material**

Biblically-grounded Anglicans need to engage in the Next Steps process, in whatever form(s) this takes, or our views will go unheard. We will have lost our chance to bear witness to what God has said about how he wants his people to live, and what this means for the Church of England now.

The LLF material will be the primary resource drawn on to inform discussions, so they need to be our reference point. We need to point out these two things:

- while LLF resources contain helpful material, they give a misleading account of modern society and the findings of recent studies
- they give the impression that what God has declared through Scripture and creation about human sexual Identity and behaviour may be legitimately questioned and doubted

### **1. Explaining the Beautiful Story**

Our involvement should not be confined to being critical about the LLF material. We could use the opportunity to explain what the CEEC's film on this topic calls 'the beautiful story'.<sup>2</sup> In the words of the Roman Catholic theologian, Christopher West:

God made us sexual beings – as men and women with a desire for union – precisely to tell the story of his love for us. In the fulfilment of love between the sexes is a great foreshadowing of something quite literally 'out of this world' – the infinite bliss and ecstasy that awaits us in heaven.<sup>3</sup>

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2. The Church of England Evangelical Council, *The Beautiful Story* at [www.ceec.info/the-beautiful-story.html](http://www.ceec.info/the-beautiful-story.html), accessed 21 February 2021. The story, witnessed to by Scripture and creation, about how God created human beings as male and female, and ordained marriage between a man and a woman as the context for sexual activity, in order to bear witness to his faithful, passionate and self-sacrificial love for his people (Song of Songs, Ezek 16, Hos 1-3, Ephesians 5:21-33); and the fulfilment of that love in the eternal marital union between Christ and his people in the world to come (Rev 19:6-9).

We also need to explain how sexual difference as an essential part of sex and marriage makes sense in the light of this 'beautiful story'. To quote the Anglican writer, Ed Shaw:

...although two different people (in looks, personalities, backgrounds) are united in the same-sex marriage, they are not bodily different, and bodies matter far more in Christian theology than we've often thought, because they represent future realities. The different bodies of a man and a woman in marriage represent the union in difference between the divine Jesus and the human church in that ultimate marriage. Sexual difference in sexual intercourse matters, not for some arbitrary reason, but because it is meant to help tell the story of where this world is heading: it's part of the very architecture of the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Shaw has written elsewhere of his own unwanted same-sex attraction. He goes on to say here that, were he to enter into a same-sex marriage:

I would be rashly changing the symbols that God himself has given us, in an inevitably unsuccessful

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3. Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing* (New York: Image, 2012), 11. The idea of 'foreshadowing' is expressed when Paul describes God's establishment of marriage in Genesis 2:24 as a '*mysterion*' referring to Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Paul's use of the Greek word *mysterion* is important because it points to the idea that, while marriage is not a 'sacrament of the Gospel' like Baptism or Holy Communion (Article XXV) it nevertheless has a 'sacramental' character in the sense that it not only testifies to the love between Christ and the church which will be fully consummated in eternity, but is a means by which God's people can actually begin to experience it in the here and now. In the words of John Paul II, marriage between a man and a woman is a 'visible and efficacious sign of grace' in John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 489.

4. Ed Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality* (London: IVP, 2021), Kindle edition, 27.

bid to please myself: I need to be sexually different from my sexual partner to what sex is meant to do for me and others. Saying that I am ‘married’ to someone who is the same sex as me would be a fiction from God’s point of view, because I would be personally rearranging how he has decided to place things. And his arrangements are ultimately for my benefit, not least because they point me (and everyone else) forwards, in a beautiful way, to the union in difference that we are all going to enjoy one day, as we who are God’s people are married to God’s Son for ever.<sup>5</sup>

We need to explain that Shaw’s warning against rearranging how God has decided to place things also applies to the issue of transgender – for someone to go through gender transition is personally rearranging how God has decided to place things. God has created men and women to be symbols of his love for the world as the men and women he has created us to be. This is for our benefit and for the benefit of everyone else. From the perspective of the beautiful story, it is for this reason that gender transition is not a legitimate option.

Finally, as biblically-grounded Anglicans, we need to say from the eschatological perspective provided by the beautiful story, those who struggle in this world with the demands that obedience to God makes upon us will not lose out in the long term. The pain will be worth it. In the words of Paul ‘this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison’ (2 Corinthians 4:17).

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5. Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality*, 28.

Those who cannot have sex in this world, or who abstain from sex in obedience to God, will experience in the world to come a union with Christ ‘that will involve more pleasure, happiness, intimacy and ecstasy than any sexual relationship beforehand.’<sup>6</sup> To put it another way, sex in this world is only the trailer. In similar fashion, those who struggle with the bodies that God has given them in this world will experience resurrected bodies in the world to come which will bring them nothing but joy.

The promise of this new life puts our concerns into perspective. Yes, obedience to God will mean having to say ‘no’ to things that we find desirable, but let us remember ‘the eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison’.

## **2. Being people of truth and love**

As the LLF Encounters remind us, issues of identity, relationships, sex and marriage involve real people who are often broken, hurting and vulnerable. They may hear the proclamation of Christian truth as a threat to their deepest sense of identity and to their most cherished relationships. We need to offer both truth and love.

In the words of Andrew Walker:

If Christians have anything to offer in this contentious age it is truth, and we should not shy away from the truth. But equally, if we use truth as blunt force trauma against those who are coming to grips with what discipleship means, woe to us. Woe to us if we demand conformity from those who are struggling more than we are willing to walk alongside them while they are struggling.

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6. Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality*, 33.



It is only loving to hold to biblical truth if that truth comes wrapped in love. We are only firmly anchored, able to grow and to share the gospel without being tossed about by every idea and argument from both the conservative and progressive ends of the spectrum, if we are 'speaking the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15). Neither love nor truth is an optional bolt-on to our Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to say:

If you or your church tends to listen and love but bend the truth in your attempt to love, the challenge is: hold to the truth, even as you love – remember that loving someone is not the same as agreeing with them, and sometimes loving someone requires you to disagree. But for those of us who are tempted to teach truth without love, the challenge is: don't neglect love. After all, it's love that wins a hearing for the truth that inspired that love in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

We need dialogue as well as proclamation, listening as much as talking.

As a result of hearing the truth proclaimed with love in the course of the Next Steps process, some may decide to embrace, or return to, the path of orthodox Christian discipleship. They will need long-term support to persevere, to grow in the key virtues of endurance and hope, and to have faith in God and in his faithfulness to them when things are at their most difficult.<sup>9</sup>

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7. Andrew T Walker, *God and The Transgender Debate* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2017), 128.

8. Walker, *God and The Transgender Debate*, 128.

### **3. Being realistic about the future**

We must not give up hope that the mind of the Church of England will be changed. We must tell the beautiful story and live as people of love and truth. At a practical and strategic level, we can also encourage greater evangelical representation on General Synod in the forthcoming election.

However, we also have to be realistic. The Church of England may decide to continue on its current liberal trajectory. If it decides to become more liberal in its doctrine and practice, structures will have to be created to enable biblically-grounded Anglicans to differentiate themselves visibly from the Church of England's new position. This may require either the development of delegated episcopal oversight from orthodox bishops ('flying bishops'), or possibly the development of a new provincial structure within the Church of England.

If the Church of England pursues a liberal path and refuses to make this provision, then in the last resort we may need to form a new Anglican province separate from the Church of England along the lines of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) in Canada and the United States. No one wants this kind of division of Anglicanism in this country, but it cannot be ruled out.

### **4. Being people of prayer**

Above all, we need to pray.

As we have noted, we do not need to pray for the Lord to reveal the truth concerning the issues LLF discusses. He

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9. For a helpful real-life example of this kind of approach see Rosaria Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2014).

has already done this. We need to pray about the spiritual warfare which the Next Steps process will involve. In Ephesians 6, Paul reminds his readers that:

...we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

There are hosts of demonic powers under the control of the devil, in rebellion against God, who are fighting against God's people and against the well-being of humanity in general.<sup>10</sup> One key aspect of this attack is in the area of human sexuality. Once again, Ed Shaw is helpful:

If sex is so important and profound in the Christian story, if it's designed to communicate both God's passionate and faithful love for us and our eternal destiny to be united with him in Christ, we should hardly be surprised that it is become such a battleground. If sexual faithfulness within marriage is meant to help us grasp God's faithfulness to us, of course the evil one wants as much sexual unfaithfulness within marriage as possible. If the marriage and sex lives of a man and a woman are meant to be a trailer for the union in difference

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10. Some scholars have argued that the reference is not to supernatural powers, but rather to the political, social religious and natural powers by which humanity is oppressed. However, their arguments are not persuasive. For a helpful introduction to the matter see John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Leicester: IVP, 1979), 263–75. For a good introduction to the whole issue of the existence of the devil and the demonic, see also Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981).

between Christ and the church, of course God's enemy wants us to feel free to change things without realising the eternal consequences. When you grasp how much sexuality and sex matter in the gospel, it should stop being such a surprise that the church is so often in a mess when it comes to these areas of belief and behaviour. The theologian Beth Felker Jones helps us to understand this:

'The way Christians do – and don't – have sex is anchored in the deepest truth about reality, and it witnesses to the reality of a God who loves and is faithful to his people. More than that, Christian sexual ethics reflect reality because they make sense of the kind of creatures God made us to be, and so those sexual ethics offer us a way to really flourish as human beings.'

So this is where you'd attack if you want to destroy – as much as possible, as quickly as possible – an individual Christian, or a whole church, or denomination, or the entire human race. Sadly, we know this from our own lives, from the churches we are part of and from the lives of the communities around us. The devil knows this most of all and has been using this information down through the centuries to inflict huge damage in his area of human existence more than any other. He's found our weakest spot and he's kept on pummelling, it.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality*, 35, quoting Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A theology of sex* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 17.

Behind the changes we have seen lie not just a series of human decisions, but the influence of the devil and the spiritual powers working with him to lead the Church, society and individuals away from God.<sup>12</sup>

The devil will continue this through the Next Steps process. So how do we fight against it? In Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul lists the spiritual weapons that God has given to his people to combat the principalities and powers and at the end of the list he writes, ‘Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication’ (verse 18). As John Stott writes, this is probably not because prayer is another spiritual weapon like the others just listed:

...but because it is to pervade all our spiritual warfare. Equipping ourselves with God’s armour is not a mechanical operation; it is itself an expression of our dependence on God, in other words of prayer. Moreover, it is prayer in the Spirit, prompted and guided by him, just as God’s word is ‘the sword of the Spirit’ which he himself employs. Thus Scripture and prayer belong together as the two chief weapons which the Spirit puts into our hands.<sup>13</sup>

Let us use Scripture as the ‘sword of the Spirit’ by proclaiming its beautiful story, and pray for what we need in the course of the Next Steps process.

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12. As Michael Green notes, it is important to get a right balance in this regard: ‘Give too much emphasis to this force outside of us, and you rob human beings of responsibility, and make them mere pawns in a celestial tug of war between God and the devil. Give too little weight to it, and you fail to explain the persistent and overwhelming wickedness of mankind, individually and collectively.’ in Green, *I Believe in Satan’s Downfall*, 89.

13. Stott, *Message of Ephesians*, 283.

Let's ask for protection for ourselves from sexual temptation, for power and wisdom in proclaiming the beautiful story with truth and love, and that God's good purposes will be achieved in the lives of the people we encounter as we engage in the LLF process, and in the life of the Church of England. For 'everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened' (Matthew 7:8).

# Conclusion

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## ‘I will build my church’

**W**e do not know what the future holds for the Church of England – whether a scenario sketched above, or something we have not thought of. But if we have faith in the God revealed in Scripture then we do not need to know. He has given us the promise ‘I will build my church’ (Matthew 16:18) and that promise is enough. Living in love and faith ultimately means doing what God asks us to do, and trusting him for the rest.

I conclude with some words of the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. During the Nazi rise to power in both the German state and church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded his listeners in a sermon on Matthew 16:13–18 that Christians must accept that it is Christ’s prerogative to build his church as and when he wills; our lesser job is to remain faithful and to bear witness to him, confident that he knows what he is doing. Bonhoeffer declared:

It is a great comfort which Christ gives to his church: you confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is my province. Church, do what is given to you to do well and you have done enough. But do it well. Pay no heed to views and opinions, don’t ask for judgements, don’t always be calculating what will happen, don’t always be on the look-out for another refuge! Church, stay a church! But Church confess, confess, confess!

Christ alone is your Lord, from his grace alone can you live as you are. Christ builds.

And the gates of hell shall not prevail against thee. Death, the greatest inheritance of everything that has existence, here meets its end. Close by the precipice of the valley of death the church is founded, the church which makes confession of Christ its life. The church possesses eternal life just where death seeks to take hold of her; and he seeks to take hold of her because she has possession of eternal life. The Confessing Church is the eternal church because Christ protects her. Her eternity is not visible in this world. She remains despite the attack of this world. The waves pass right over her and sometimes she seems to be completely covered and lost. But the victory is hers, because Christ her Lord is by her side and he has overcome the world of death. Do not ask to see the victory; believe in the victory and it is yours.<sup>1</sup>

As we engage in the Next Steps process may we do what God gives us to do, and may we do it well, leaving the outcome in God's safe hands.

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1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* (London: Fontana, 1970), 212–13.



# FAQs

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## **1. What is Living in Love and Faith?**

In 2017, General Synod voted not to ‘take note’ of a House of Bishops’ report, ‘Marriage and Same-Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations’. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York therefore needed to suggest an alternative way forward and they proposed a ‘large-scale teaching document around the subject of human sexuality’. LLF is the resulting material. It consists of a 468-page book and a huge ‘learning hub’ on the topic of identity, relationships and human sexuality (including films, podcasts, video course, library of resources, etc).

## **2. Where can I find the LLF material?**

It is all available online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>. You can also order a copy of the book from Church House Publishing.

## **3. What do I need to read if I am a church leader?**

The summary in Chapter 2 of this book will give you a comprehensive overview of the LLF material. You could read it alongside the pdf of the LLF book (available online). The rest of this book is intended to help you assess the LLF material.

## **4. How can I help my church members engage with the issues?**

In terms of engaging with the LLF process, Chapter 1 of this book will give the background to the material and process. The 2-minute introductory video on the LLF website gives a flavour of what to expect from LLF (<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>). And then there’s the 468-page book...

If you want to encourage people to engage with the issues covered in LLF from an orthodox and biblical perspective, the 'Further resources' section at the end of this book has suggestions for further reading and links to useful websites.

### **5. What is the process?**

Now that LLF has been published, we are in a period of 'church-wide learning and engagement' across the C of E as a whole. Alongside this, the Next Steps Group (a group of bishops, chaired by Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally) will lead a process of 'discernment and decision-making about the way forward' and bring recommendations to the House of Bishops. By the end of 2022, the bishops will make a decision about what they think the way forward for the Church of England should be and this proposal will then go to General Synod to be debated and voted on. (On final timing, note end of FAQ 7.)

At the moment, it is unclear exactly how the discernment process will be conducted in parishes, deaneries and dioceses.

### **6. Which bishops are on the Next Steps group?**

The following bishops are members of the Next Steps groups: London, Fulham, Grantham, Winchester, Loughborough, Sherborne, Ripon, Warrington, Truro, Bradwell, Maidstone and Norwich.

### **7. How quickly do we need to respond?**

No official timescale has yet been published but the material says discussions will take place during 2021, and decisions will be made by the House of Bishops 'by the end of 2022 at the latest'. In other words, the timetable is very tight. (According to the report of the bishops' Next Steps

meeting in January, the timetable will be reviewed in March 2021, in the light of the impact of Covid-19.)

### **8. What will we need to do?**

We must engage with LLF material and the Next Steps process or our views will go unheard. But we mustn't forget that this is also an opportunity to explain the 'beautiful story' of the gospel and what orthodox Christian living looks like. Above all, we must pray.

### **9. Does our church need to respond formally to the Next Steps Group?**

The C of E is encouraging churches to run groups to engage with the material using a 5-session video course. Given the material provided, it is unlikely that evangelical churches will want to run these groups, but each church / church leader will need to decide how to respond to the LLF process. If we don't respond to the Next Steps group, our views will not be recorded or taken into account.

### **10. How do we respond to the Next Steps Group?**

Feedback can be submitted online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/contact-living-love-and-faith-next-steps-group>. It can be submitted from church communities or from individuals, as a document or as an audio recording of a discussion.

### **11. Can you give me a brief assessment of the LLF material?**

The LLF material includes wide range of views and offers both liberal and orthodox interpretations of Scripture's teaching on human sexuality. Rather than teaching what is right and wrong, the material aims to facilitate respectful conversation and to allow all sides in the debate about human sexuality to have their voices heard. The 'stories'

included mean that almost equal weight is given to the experiences of the participants as to the teaching of Scripture. It focuses almost entirely on same-sex sexual relationships and hardly mentions other important human sexuality issues (eg abortion, pornography, divorce, etc). There are some positive things about the material, and many areas of concern.

**12. I've heard the science in LLF is flawed – is that true?**

Evangelicals will take issue with much of the chapter on science. For example, there is a one-sided emphasis on the biological origins of same-sex attraction, a failure to engage with criticisms about biological causation, and a failure to acknowledge the evidence for social and psychological influences. There are serious flaws in the section on the benefits of gender transition. See my analysis in Chapter 4.

**13. Is there anything good in the LLF book and resources?**

Yes, there is material in the LLF book with which Bible-believing Anglicans will agree, and the evangelicals involved in the process worked hard to include it. In addition, there are some excellent resources in the LLF library.

**14. Is LLF at all relevant to non-Anglicans?**

Much of material reflects the current thinking of society today which may be useful to those in other denominations. It is certainly also fuel for prayer in terms of the state of Christianity in Great Britain today.

**15. I've got 30 minutes. Which chapters of this book shall I read first?**

Read Chapter 1 for a brief background to LLF, then skim-read Chapter 2 for a summary of LLF's contents. In Chapter 4, I

outline three areas of positive teaching, and nine areas of concern. Finally, Chapter 6 sums up what we need to do.

**16. How would you sum up your concerns about LLF?**

LLF's lack of clarity about the nature of Scripture and what Scripture teaches about human sexuality is at the heart of its inadequacy. It is ambiguous about the authority of Scripture, and it fails to interpret and apply Scripture properly in relations to the topics under discussion.

**17. Is there any chance of an amicable/satisfactory outcome to this process?**

It is hard to see how the widely-differing views within the Church of England can be reconciled into a way forward that is agreeable to everyone. Having said that, we must not give up hope that the mind of the C of E will be changed. If the C of E pursues a liberal path, we will face difficult decisions. We must pray.

# Further resources

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## **On the issue of the development of Western society and the sexual revolution**

Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story* (London: IVP, 2016)

Gabrielle Kuby, *The Global Sexual Revolution* (Briar Noll: Angelico Press, 2015)

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1983)

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press, 2007)

Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020)

## **On a Christian approach to sexual identity and ethics**

### **Introductory film**

The Church of England Evangelical Council, *The Beautiful Story*, at [www.ceec.info/the-beautiful-story.html](http://www.ceec.info/the-beautiful-story.html) (2020)

### **Introductory books**

Martin Davie, *Living in Love and Faith: A Concise Introduction and Review* (London: Latimer Trust, 2021)

Sean Doherty, *The Only Way is Ethics, Part 1: Sex and Marriage* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2015)

Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A theology of sex* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015)

Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011)

Stephen McAlpine, *Being the Bad Guys: How to Live for Jesus in a world that says you shouldn't* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2021)

Ian Paul, *Same-sex Unions: The Key Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2014)

Vaughan Roberts, *Transgender* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2017)

Ed Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality* (London: IVP, 2021)

Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018)

## **More advanced studies**

Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007)

Martin Davie, *Glorify God in your Body: Human identity and flourishing in marriage, singleness and friendship* (London: CEEC, 2018)

Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001)

Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015)

Dennis Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian ethics and the moral life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006)

John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A theology of the body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006)

Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2017)

## Websites

Anglican Mainstream <https://anglicanmainstream.org>

Christian Concern <https://christianconcern.com>

Core Issues Trust <https://www.core-issues.org>

Living Out <https://www.livingout.org>

True Freedom Trust <https://truefreedomtrust.co.uk>

## Selected titles by the same author

*What does the Bible really say: Addressing revisionist arguments on sexuality and the Bible* (London: Latimer Trust, 2020)

*Glorify God in your Body: Human Identity and Flourishing in marriage, singleness and friendship* (Lost Coin Books, 2019)

*Our Inheritance of Faith: A Commentary on the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Malton: Gilead Books, 2019)

*The Gospel and the Anglican Tradition* (Malton: Gilead Books, 2019)

*Sex, Marriage and Family Life: Basic Christian Primer series* (London: Latimer Trust, 2020)

*A Guide to the Church of England* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019)

*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: Liturgy, Doctrine and Scripture in History and Today* (London: Latimer Trust, 2019)

*The Athanasian Creed* (London: Latimer Trust, 2019)

*Studies on the Bible and Same-sex Relationships Since 2003* (Malton: Gilead Books, 2019)



*Religious Approaches to Human Rights* (Oxford: Select Academic Publishing Oxford, 2016)



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