

NOTES FROM PCANZ DIALOGUE ON SEXUALITY, BIBLICAL MORALITY AND LEADERSHIP (2022)

The Dialogue was commissioned by the 2022 on-line Special Assembly, with the following briefⁱ:

'a dialogue on a way forward in a church divided over issues of sexuality, biblical morality and leadership led by the Moderator and Moderator Designate who will gather a group together representing a variety of views on this issue.'

The goal of the dialogue was to talk about a way forward for a church very divided on these issues. It was not about relitigating who is right and who is wrong. See appendix 1 for the full proposal brought to the Special Assembly.

To help inform our conversation some work was done before the meeting including the following:

- a. Statement of our present state in the PCANZ and the recent history that has led us to this point (prepared by Stuart Lange and peer reviewed by Susan Jones.
- c. Across the Spectrum style statement of theological and biblical understanding of views on both sides of this issue (prepared by the Doctrine Core Group)

The Dialogue took place at Mangere Presbyterian Church on 4-5 October

The Dialogue was led by:

Hamish Galloway
Rose Luxford
Fakaofa Kaio

Book of Order:

Kerry Enright

The participants were:

From Affirm:

Stuart Lange
Emma Keown
Becky Heale
Reece Frith
Mark Maney
Jonny Sunderland

Jennifer Shaw
Aaron Johnstone

From the Inclusive Group:

Jordan Redding
Ross Scott
Kyle Hastelow
Jonathan Barb
Annabelle Harrison
Richie Brown
Cherie Moran
Jill McDonald

From the Middle Ground:

Caleb Hardie
Tokerau Joseph
Kevin Finlay
Anne Aalbers
Sue Fenton

Process for the Dialogue

The dialogue took place both in whole group times and in three small groups. The whole group time involved setting the scene, hearing each other's story, establishing our values and ground rules and giving feedback on small group work. In the smaller groups time was spent identifying different scenarios (variously representing aspects of competition, compromise, collaboration, or avoidance), and brainstorming the pros and cons of each scenario.

The agreed values included...

- We want this to be a place of mutual respect
- We want people to be able to say what they think without being afraid they will be quoted outside the circle.
- We want to agree on what is reported from here.
- We want to value each contribution.
- We are not here to persuade people to our views.
- We want people to feel encouraged to express their view.
- As we work together, we want to trust in the process to develop.
- If the conversation becomes heated or people feel unsafe the Moderator and the group will find a way to reduce the temperature.
- We will not communicate electronically within the group or outside what is happening in the group.

Reflections at the end of the dialogue included:

1. There was genuine respect for the other, their stories, integrity, opinions, theological viewpoints, and perspectives on the Bible.

2. There was a shared desire for shalom, specifically in attending to how we deal with this issue – avoiding repetitive hurtful debate - balancing people’s constitutional right to raise issues and not relitigating them at every Assembly, between debate and constant debate.
3. There was a high level of honesty in the sharing of stories and perspectives, taking seriously the trust we committed to.
4. There was a willingness to acknowledge the hurt and the pain that conversations and decisions around this issue has caused in the church.
5. There was agreement that there is potential for a similar style of dialogue to take place throughout the church.
6. Questions were also raised for further consideration:
 - a. What does unity mean and how does this relate to truth?
 - b. How do we make space for an informed conversation – why there are different perspectives; learning new language; understanding perspectives
 - c. How do we give expression to the value of reconciliation?
 - d. How are we being called to engage with the emerging world?

Scenarios that emerged from small group work

Many different scenarios emerged from the small groups and were discussed in the larger group. At a subsequent meeting of a smaller representative group from the Dialogue, the various scenarios were condensed into the 12 outlined below.

Scenario 1¹: MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO

Pro

- Upholds sanctity of marriage as traditionally understood.
- Rule applies to any sexual relationship outside of marriage between one man and one woman.
- Many believe that the PCANZ status quo is consistent with the Biblical and historic Christian tradition.
- The status quo reflects the majority view consistently upheld at G.A’s.
- Clear, definite regulation that gives clarity about what is permissible
- Thus far, status quo has prevented schism. There has be relative stability, since 2006.
- Liberty of discussion continues.

¹ Numbering does not reflect any ranking, but is solely to allow ready reference when discussing

- Some have joined the PCANZ because it holds this standard.
- LGBTQI+ people remain able to be part of PCANZ congregations.

Con

- LGBTQI+ people feel they are not fully accepted within the PCANZ and are discriminated against.
- Some people are unable to be in leadership or ministry.
- Some people have left because of the status quo.
- Some negative external perception of the PCANZ .
- Status quo deepens a 'them/us' stand-off.
- The PCANZ has lost its voice among many Rainbow people.
- Some young people feel they can't become Christian.
- Leads to ongoing divisive debate at GA's.
- Those who would like a Presbyterian Minister to officiate at their same sex marriage are unable to do so.

Scenario 2: THE CHURCH BECOME FULLY 'INCLUSIVE'

Pro

- Full permission for rainbow people to be ordained / capacity for people to respond to sense of call.
- Perception, among some, that an inclusive position would be more biblically and theologically faithful.
- Could open up PCANZ to new perspectives and new members.
- A wider diversity of people could be available for ministry.
- The PCANZ would be more able to minister to LGBTQIA+ people.
- Could be healing for some.
- Positive impact on the mental health of young rainbow people.

- Some who are unchurched or have left the church may feel more positive towards the PCANZ.
- Closer alignment of the PCANZ with the Human Rights Act NZ.

Con

- Highly likely to result in schism: churches, ministers, elders and members unable to live with this would leave PCANZ.
- Congregations with diverse views could face difficult division, loss of members and the potential of a church split.
- Resulting conflicts and division not a good witness to society.
- Some churches, ministers and members could remain, but could significantly 'disengage' from the denomination.
- Ongoing hurt among those dissenting to the decision.
- Potential for continuing difficult debates at General Assembly.
- Loss of membership especially among rural and provincial churches could lead to closures.
- Potential for the PCANZ to become an echo-chamber church through a lack of diverse views.
- Conservative voices will feel silenced.
- Could cause 'moral injury' if people felt unable in conscience to stay a part of the church.
- Where churches leave PCANZ because of this decision then there will be legal implications around property and money and, if not dealt with in a just and gracious way, could lead to loss of sacred space and history, loss of income, sense of betrayal of past giving, and injustice.

Scenario 3: SEPARATE SYNODS (The Church restructures into two synods one of which maintains the status quo with regard to ordination and marriage, the other taking an inclusive position.)²

² Considerable work would need to be done on how this would work. It is noted that a proposal recently considered by the Church of Scotland along these lines went into detail around how an arrangement like this could work. At the Dialogue the feeling was that it would be best to create an inclusive synod which ministers and congregations could opt into, thus reducing the divisive impact of every congregation needing to make a choice)

Pro

- Congregations free to live according to their own convictions, and to develop in their own way.
- Each synod could have the potential to develop its own ethos, flavour and identity
- Congregations are free to opt into a more progressive/inclusive synod.
- Creates sufficient differentiation and distance, to enable each perspective to be held without a sense of compromising their position.
- Higher level of unity in each group.
- Would reduce divisive debates at GA around issues of sexuality and sexual morality.
- Avoids issues about loss of properties.
- Retains General Assembly but with the devolution of some matters and powers to the Synods.
- Avoids hard schism, and allows movement. Just a partial separation, and future reunion not precluded.
- Congregations free to move from one synod to another.
- Congregations able to refer people to churches in another synod.
- Congregations could offer reciprocal membership to those within a congregation who wished to be affiliated with a different synod.

Con

- Some conservatives would see this as an unacceptable compromise, because it involves the PCANZ allowing gay ordination (and therefore conservatives by association).
- A high degree of separate identity and autonomy would be required to make this acceptable to conservatives.
- Some progressives / inclusives would see this as an unacceptable compromise because it allows injustice to continue.
- Compromises the high value Christians place on unity.

- Separation into synods would seem a radical step for many.
- Potentially could accentuate our differences.
- Could potentially split some congregations where views are divided.
- Ministers could lose some collegiality with some colleagues.
- Impact on Te Aka Puaho?
- Raises questions about Moderator(s).
- Would bring more complexity and duplication of bureaucracy.
- Could reduce functions and relevance of General Assembly.
- It would take time and energy to achieve such synodisation.
- The Book of Order would need significant revision.

Scenario 4: EVERY CONGREGATION ALLOWED DISCRETION TO MAKE ITS OWN DECISIONS ON SEXUALITY AND MINISTRY

Pro

- Maintains 'broad church'.
- Each congregation can make its own decisions.
- Makes space for those currently excluded from ministry.

Con

- A compromise for both perspectives.
- Schism: this scenario would still be seen as totally unacceptable by many conservatives and many would leave or want their churches to leave the PCANZ.
- Some parishes don't want to have to choose because of local division of opinion on this matter.

Scenario 5: GENERAL ASSEMBLY SETS ASIDE STATUS QUO FOR FIVE YEARS

Pro

- Would advance LGBT+ cause.
- Would trial inclusion model.

- Reflects year of jubilee concept.
- General Assembly could concentrate on other things.

Con

- Would not be accepted by conservative side.
- After five years, would revert to status quo or new decision.
- After five years, what happens with those ordained in the meantime?

Scenario 6: CONGREGATIONS WISHING TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE BECOME COOPERATING VENTURES OR BE IN CLOSER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE METHODIST CHURCH

Pro

- Status Quo maintained.
- More progressive churches could find more inclusive options through association with (or even joining) other denominations.
- Such associations would take advantage of the unique New Zealand situation of local unity ventures and some existing more liberal/progressive denominations.

Con

- No guarantee the Methodist Church would welcome or facilitate such arrangements.
- Probable complexities.

Scenario 7: A FIVE-YEAR MORATORIUM ON DISCUSSION ACROSS THE WHOLE CHURCH

Pro

- No divisive debates for now.
- Might be healing.
- Might give time for new conversations to emerge.
- Might be stabilising.

Con

- Silences some.
- Unrealistic.
- No progress possible for inclusive cause.

- Could further undermine conversations with some Rainbow people.
- Just defers.
- Maintains status quo.

Scenario 8: A 5-YEAR MORATORIUM ON DEBATE OR DECISION, IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY ONLY

Pro

- Grassroots-oriented.
- Prevents some unwelcome debates at General Assembly.
- The status quo would continue.

Con

- The status quo would continue.
- Those who feel hurt would have to wait another five years.

Scenario 9: GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECIDES THAT IT WILL REQUIRE 60% DECISION TO DEBATE ON SEXUAL MORALITY AND SEXUALITY ISSUES

Pro

- Maintains the status quo.
- Fewer unwanted debates.

Con

- Maintains the status quo.
- Minority voices silenced.

Scenario 10: THE CHURCH ALLOWS PRESBYTERIES TO LICENCE AND ORDAIN PEOPLE FROM THE RAINBOW COMMUNITY AS LOCAL ORDAINED MINISTERS TO WORK IN SAFE RAINBOW SPACES

Pro

- Gives ministry to Rainbow people.
- Develops skills of those ministering in such a context.
- Complements existing PCANZ ministries.

Con

- From an inclusive perspective, doesn't go far enough.
- From conservative perspective, would unacceptably compromise status quo as represented in the 2006 ordination ruling.

Scenario 11: THE CHURCH SUPPORTS RAINBOW CHURCH COMMUNITIES WITH FINANCES AND MINISTRY

Pros

- The PCANZ retains its traditional position while supporting the needs of rainbow people.
- It would encourage and empower rainbow people.

Cons

- Conservatives would not be willing to support or help fund an initiative they could not agree with philosophically or theologically.

Scenario 12: FULL SCHISM (each stream setting the other free to follow their own convictions and conscience, through the PCANZ collaboratively dividing and giving birth to two separate Presbyterian denominations)

Pro

- Each stream could then follow its own convictions and conscience (as with the United Methodist Church in America).
- There would be greater unity within each new church than currently within the PCANZ.
- There would be an end to the hurts felt by each stream within the current PCANZ.
- With the clearer focus, there would be opportunities for the growth of each new Presbyterian denomination.
- There could be reciprocal membership at local congregational level, so the minority would still belong and congregations would not be divided.

Con

- We would lose the opportunity to learn from one another.
- It would be a matter of grief for many to break the unity of the PCANZ.

Property Issues in the event of a scenario that leads to schism

This was also a topic of discussion at the Dialogue. The following consensus emerged at the dialogue:

In the event of a scenario that leads to an inevitable outcome of schism, the Presbyterian Church would be well served by learning from other churches in NZ and around the world. Measures that avoid expensive and toxic disputes and litigation are highly desirable.

Therefore, it would serve the Church well to explore options for a 'just and gracious settlement' for those people of either perspective who find themselves on the grounds of conscience unable to remain in the Church. It is noted that the Church's stance has been, relying on the legislation and the opinions provided, that a congregation cannot decide to leave the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. Only individuals can leave. However, it is worth noting that options have been developed in other denominations when a whole congregation decides to leave where schism is seen as 'inevitable', that is, a recognised and logical outcome of a national church decision.

Options used in other denominations include

- a) gifting property and money to a leaving congregation (as in a Presbyterian Church of Canada proposal where the leaving congregation could buy the buildings with money gifted to them by the National Church on the day of purchase)
- b) long term peppercorn leases with appropriate conditions regarding upkeep and liability (it was noted that this has the potential for reunification in the future)

The strong consensus of the dialogue was that it would be essential to ensure in the in any cases of gifting or long term leases assurance that the leaving group would have accountability to a denomination and appropriate governance.

Pro

- Would give a just option to those congregations who worry about losing everything if they believe they cannot remain in the PCANZ.
- Would allow the church to be proactive rather than reactive.
- Would avoid an unjust winner-takes-all scenario.
- Not a plan for schism but more a contingency plan to avoid an unjust schism such has occurred in other denominations in NZ and overseas.

Con

- Such provision could make schism too easy.
- Would need provision for possible future return.
- Moves from a covenantal relationship with the PCANZ to more of a consumer model.

Agreed steps to be taken following the Dialogue:

1. Collate notes (this was done and notes sent to all participants)
2. Smaller group to process the notes and produce a summary (This happened in Auckland on 29th November where Hamish Galloway convened a representative group that consisted of Mark Maney, Stuart Lange, Caleb Hardy, Kevin Finlay, Cherie Moran and Kyle Hastelow. This document was sent to the whole group for discussion and development)
3. The wider group will be consulted about what is produced by the smaller group (This took place in February 2023 and it was agreed that Hamish Galloway write a report to the GA outlining what took place and recommending a the same kind of dialogue be made available to each Presbytery. The constructive way this dialogue took place is a model for creating safe space in the church that gets us talking, learning, understanding and appreciating.

Other possibilities explored included:

4. A resource that helps to understand people's experiences?
5. Ensure we have other voices schools, Presbyterian Support, chaplaincies ...

Appendix 1

Proposal 8: Inclusivity

1. This proposal is brought to Assembly by Presbytery Central. It was initiated by St Andrews Presbyterian Church Hastings Parish and adopted by the presbytery.
2. The proposal originally recommended that the Church commit to being fully inclusive by (a) opening positions of leadership to all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender, age, disability or ethnicity, (b) advocating for equal rights in church and society for all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender, age, disability or ethnicity, (c) recognising the pain and suffering caused by excluding or discriminating against people on the basis of sexual orientation, gender, age, disability or ethnicity.

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3. Leave is sought to withdraw the original wording of the recommendations, to be replaced by the following:
 - a. That the Church commits to a dialogue on a way forward in a church divided over issues of sexuality, biblical morality and leadership.
 - b. That this dialogue be led by the Moderator and Moderator Designate who will gather a group together representing a variety of views on this issue.
 - c. That the outcomes of the discussions be reported to the 2023 General Assembly for consideration.

Rationale for the proposal

- a. General Assemblies have held divisive debates about inclusivity issues since 1985.
- b. This process of General Assembly debate and vote has produced winner/loser outcomes that have caused hurt and anger.
- c. There is much residual ill feeling about the way these issues have dominated Assembly for many years. Many lament the way it divides us, and diverts attention from other issues.
- d. However, the issue remains very alive in our church. We remain divided.
- e. Churches around the world similar to ours are making decisions to accept people in same sex relationships into positions of leadership or are recognising that the different positions cannot be reconciled and are choosing to formally, graciously, and justly separate. We have a chance to learn from what is happening elsewhere and to avoid the acrimonious and difficult type of schism which involves property disputes and court cases.
- f. The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has the chance to prepare for a situation where such decisions are made and plan for a way ahead that is collaborative and lifegiving.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand status quo on sexuality and sexual morality issues and how we got there

A paper prepared by the Rev Dr Stuart Lange, September 2022, at the request of the Moderator, the Right Rev Hamish Galloway¹

A. The doctrinal and regulatory status quo in the PCANZ in relation to sexuality, sexual morality, and leadership

The 2006 Assembly enacted the following ruling:

‘In accordance with the supreme and subordinate standards of the Church, and with previous Assembly decisions, session, parish councils, presbyteries and district councils shall not accept for training, license, ordain or induct anyone involved in a sexual relationship outside of faithful marriage between a man and a woman. In relation to homosexuality, and in the interests of natural justice, this ruling shall not prejudice anyone who, as at 29 September 2006, had been accepted for training, licensed, ordained or inducted.’

Notes:

- (a) The reference to supreme and subordinate standards is to the Word of God contained in the Old and New Testaments and to the PCANZ’s historic confessional standards.
- (b) The reference to ‘previous Assembly decisions’ is to the 1985 Assembly declaration that, inter alia, ‘homosexual acts are sinful’, and to the 1991 Assembly statement that ‘God’s intention for sexual relationships, as affirmed by Jesus Christ, is loving, mutual and faithful marriage between a man and a woman, and that intimate sexual expressions outside of that context fall short of God’s standard’. (See full text of these below).
- (c) At Assemblies, decisions on such matters have often been strongly contested, with deep convictions and feelings on all sides. The Reasons for Dissent and the Answers to Reasons for Dissent, as recorded in Assembly minutes, are a very useful resource for understanding the different views.
- (d) No Assembly has ruled that the doctrinal position as embodied in the GA2006 ruling constitutes a ‘fundamental doctrine’ of the PCANZ, and it remains a matter on which those ordained within the PCANZ retain liberty of conscience, though not liberty of action.

B. The background to the current PCANZ status quo

1. The historic Christian tradition

For nearly two millennia, Christian churches shared a doctrinal understanding of marriage and sexual morality based on the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament as commonly understood, and approved of sexual relations only within marriage between one man and one woman.

2. A shift in western societies

From the late 1960s, with the onset of the sexual revolution, there was a questioning of that traditional understanding, both in society and among some church people of more liberal theological convictions. In 1968, the PCNZ Public Questions Committee referred to homosexuality as 'deviant' and reported that in some cases a 'cure' was possible, but also discouraged 'judgment' of homosexual people and implicitly supported law reform,² and that Assembly subsequently carried a resolution supporting Law Reform.³ Through the 1970s, there was a political campaign for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in New Zealand. In 1974, the General Assembly declared that the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand believes that homosexual acts are contrary to God's intention, but that homosexuals should be shown love and offered treatment rather than imprisoned.⁴

3. 1985 General Assembly (Dunedin)

In the context of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill being considered by Parliament, the 1985 General Assembly resolved:

'That Assembly

- (a) Affirm to homosexuals God's love and acceptance of them as people; and affirm the power of Jesus Christ to forgive, and of the Holy Spirit to transform, the lives of all those involved in a homosexual lifestyle
- (b) Affirm that homosexual acts are sinful
- (c) Call the church to initiate compassionate ministry in the power of Jesus to those involved in a homosexual lifestyle
- (d) Recommend that homosexual acts in private between consenting males over 20 no longer be a criminal offence, and
- (e) Call on the Government, in the event of legislation to decriminalise male homosexual acts, to enact appropriate measures to protect public health and public morality in schools, public places, and places of work.⁵

4. 1991 General Assembly (Invercargill)

In the context of a wider controversy involving the Methodist Church, GA91 received five overtures on issues around sexuality and sexual morality. In response, the Assembly carried several significant resolutions.⁶

- (a) A further doctrinal statement was made by the GA91, one which was broader in scope than just homosexuality, and which – especially in its first clause – has been seen by many as the definitive summary of the Presbyterian Church’s doctrinal position in matters of sexual morality:⁷

‘...that God's intention for sexual relationships, as affirmed by Jesus Christ, is loving, mutual and faithful marriage between a man and a woman, and that intimate sexual expressions outside of that context fall short of God's standard’.

‘...that the church must offer compassionate ministry to those who in their sexual behaviour have fallen short of God’s standard, and must offer to them the Gospel of grace, of forgiveness and restoration’.

‘...that those who continue in sexual acts in any context outside of heterosexual marriage are not appropriate persons to be in the leadership of this Church.’⁸

- (b) The Assembly set up a Special Committee to consider these issues and consult with the wider church, and to report back to Assembly no later than 1995.
- (c) It was resolved that until the Special Committee reported, no Presbytery was to license, ordain, or induct any ‘self-avowed active homosexual’.

5. 1993 General Assembly (Auckland)

The 1993 Assembly allowed the prohibition adopted two years before to lapse. Later in the Assembly, a resolution was carried explaining that the Assembly wanted to establish a neutral environment for the work of the Special Committee, to avoid further deepening the Church’s disunity, and to defer decision till 1995.⁹

6. 1994 General Assembly (Wellington)

GA94 unanimously acknowledged ‘the hurt felt by those on all sides of this issue’, that it wished ‘to avoid further debate or fresh initiatives’ at that Assembly, that no Assembly has specifically endorsed the ordination of practising homosexuals, that there were currently no specific regulations barring

the ordination of practising homosexuals, and there remain procedures for objection prior to any licensing, ordination or induction.¹⁰

7. Findings of the 1995 Judicial Commission

A Judicial Commission was established to hear the complaints of nine dissenters against the decision of Dunedin Presbytery in November 1994 to proceed with the licensing of a candidate for ministry who was living in a homosexual partnership.¹¹ It upheld seven of the eight grounds for complaint with dissent. Because of exceptional circumstances, however, the Commission allowed the decision to license the candidate. It also advised that under the Human Rights Act (1993), which allows for an exemption in Section 39(1) for the purposes of an organised religion in compliance with its doctrines, rules, or established customs, the Church's position concerning the licensing and ordination of homosexual persons 'must be very clear'. It also made the wider point (in relation to the 1985, 1991, 1993, and 1994 Assembly decisions in these matters) that all decisions of the General Assembly have no 'limited shelf life' or 'use by' date, 'remain binding on the Church' and 'continue speaking until the Assembly itself decides to amend, modify, or fall from them'.

8. 1995 General Assembly (Christchurch)

The report and recommendations of the Special Committee to Explore Issues regarding Homosexuality and the Church were presented to GA95. The key recommendation was that, in the light of diversity within the church, no steps be taken to enact any regulation in this matter.¹² The debates were conducted in private. None of the recommendations of the Special Committee were supported by Assembly. When the Assembly emerged from private, it was reported that Assembly had carried a resolution adjourning all debate and decision making on the issue of homosexuality for the remainder of Assembly, and calling for dialogue and prayer in the Church for God's guidance.¹³ In effect, the Church's decision was referred to the 1996 Assembly.

9. 'Face-to-Face' discussions

Between the 1995 and 1996 Assemblies, 'Face to Face' dialogues were held around the country. There was a two-day retreat of twelve key leaders of different convictions at Star of the Sea (Miramar) in November 1995, followed up by gatherings in December 1995 (at the Moderator's home in Palmerston North) and April 1996 (at the Assembly Executive Secretary's home in Wellington). The last of those meetings agreed on the wording of four different alternatives to be put to the 1996 Assembly.

10. 1996 General Assembly (Wellington)

The four alternatives were presented and debated:

- A. The PCANZ will not permit its courts to license, ordain or induct a practising homosexual.
- B. The PCANZ will not permit its courts to refuse to license, ordain or induct a practising homosexual.
- C. The PCANZ will permit its courts to have discretion whether or not to license, ordain or induct a practising homosexual.
- D. The PCANZ will take no steps to enact legislation in regard to the licensing, ordination, or induction of a practising homosexual.¹⁴

‘Alternative A’ received majority support,¹⁵ and the following motion was carried and then sent down under the Barrier Act: (170 for, 142 against):

‘That Assembly, recognising the need for a clear ruling on practising homosexuals, rules that its courts shall not license, ordain, or induct practising homosexuals. At the same time Assembly acknowledges the deep diversity of convictions in the Church on issues relating to homosexuality and calls the Church to move ahead in a spirit of gracious respect and compassion for one another’.¹⁶

It was also carried:

- (a) That, in response to a statement on behalf of Te Hinota Maori, Assembly adjourn debate on various related changes to regulations as prepared by the Book of Order Committee and ask Te Hinota to initiate ‘a process of consultation’.¹⁷
- (b) That the ruling of the Assembly would not apply to anyone already ordained.¹⁸
- (c) That a Special Commission be set up to ‘ensure a just settlement’ for any minister or congregation who may wish to resign from the PCANZ on account of Assembly’s ruling.¹⁹
- (d) That a (non-binding) referendum of church members would be held on the ruling, and the result reported to the next Assembly.²⁰

11. 1998 General Assembly (Christchurch)

- (a) The outcome of the Referendum was reported. The Referendum was 75% for of the 1995 ruling (if Cooperating Ventures were included), or 78% (if only Presbyterian parishes were included).²¹

- (b) Several overtures and notices of motion which opposed the enactment of the 1995 ruling were not supported by Assembly.
- (c) When the enactment of the 1995 ruling was put to the vote, it received a vote of 54.5% for, which was insufficient under the revised Standing Orders (which now required 60%).
- (d) Assembly resolved to hold an extra Assembly meeting in 1999, with the sole agenda issue of 'Unity and Diversity', and guided by a 'Commission of Diversity' of up to four members, which would develop, in consultation with the whole Church, proposals to provide structures that would 'allow an appropriate degree of autonomy for groups within the PCANZ with diverse theological perspectives' while 'subject to the same standards with diverse insights into those standards'.²²
- (e) It was also resolved that for one year no practising homosexuals would be licensed, ordained inducted,²³ and that for one year there should be a 'rahui' on debate around the Church on issues around sexuality and leadership.²⁴

12. 1999 Extra General Assembly (Christchurch)

- (a) The Commission on Diversity reported on its consultations around the Church. It reported widespread pain across the Church, among people of various persuasions. It proposed that Assembly call the Church to deep repentance for its disunity. It offered biblical and theological reflections on unity and diversity. It emphasised the commonalities in the PCANZ, including its reformed confessional heritage, and its Supreme and Subordinate standards. The Commission did not favour exploring either semi-autonomous synods nor releasing some (with a just settlement) into a new church. It also reported that Church Property Trustees did not consider they had authority in law to divest property to those leaving.
- (b) Twenty-five Overtures and four Memorials were presented to GA99. Many called for the 1985 and 1991 decisions to be fallen from, or for parishes to be free to discern suitability for ordination. Other overtures asked for the Assembly to decisively settle the sexuality issue to be on the basis of Scripture, or for repentance for disobedience, or for binding referenda, or synods. A motion about unity needing to be based on a shared biblical understanding fell just short of being carried, with 59.6% support.
- (c) GA99 took place against the background of profound divisions of belief around issues of sexuality, and deepening fears for the unity of the PCANZ. The extra Assembly did not resolve those, and made no decisions about

homosexuality and leadership. One key outcome, though, was the statement of the Book of Order and Judicial Committee (and its advice to the Commission of Diversity) that, legally, the decisions of the 1985 and 1991 General Assemblies remained in force, and that the courts of the Church must 'uphold' those decisions and 'not license, ordain or induct practising homosexuals'.²⁵

13. 2002 General Assembly (Wellington)

It was agreed by Assembly: 'That Assembly, mindful of deeply held convictions and sensitivities on all sides of debates within the Church, urges everyone to respect all other persons, seeking to avoid depersonalising others, caricaturing their convictions or questioning their motivations'.²⁶

14. Findings of the 2003 Judicial Commission

A Judicial Commission in October 2003 took the opposite view to the 1999 Book of Order Judicial Committee report and instead ruled that, in the absence (at that time) of any specific regulation to the contrary, there was no legal barrier to the licensing, ordination or induction of 'practising homosexuals'.²⁷

15. 2004 General Assembly (Christchurch)

- (a) Multiple overtures were received by GA04, pressing for an Assembly ruling and regulation.
- (b) A proposal from the Council of Assembly for 'A Way Forward with regard to Homosexual Persons' was presented. It proposed that parishes and presbyteries be free to make their own choice in this matter. The recommendation was lost (38% for, 62% against).
- (c) The following alternative recommendation was carried (63% for, 37% against), sent down under the Barrier Act, and adopted ad interim:

'That the General Assembly now rule, in accordance with the Supreme and Subordinate Standards of the Church, and with previous Assembly decisions, that this church may not accept for training, license, ordain, or induct anyone involved in a sexual relationship outside of faithful marriage between a man and a woman. In relation to homosexuality, in the interests of natural justice, this ruling shall not prejudice anyone who, as at the date of this meeting, has been accepted for training, licensed, ordained or inducted.'²⁸

16. 2006 General Assembly (Auckland)

GA06 enacted the 2004 ruling as a binding regulation (65% for, 35% against):

‘In accordance with the supreme and subordinate standards of the Church, and with previous Assembly decisions, session, parish councils, presbyteries and district councils shall not accept for training, license, ordain or induct anyone involved in a sexual relationship outside of faithful marriage between a man and a woman. In relation to homosexuality, and in the interests of natural justice, this ruling shall not prejudice anyone who, as at 29 September 2006, had been accepted for training, licensed, ordained or inducted.’

C. Assembly debates and decisions post-2006

Since 2010, General Assembly has received a number of proposals that the 2006 ruling as enacted in Section 9.1(1A) be fallen from.

2010 General Assembly (Christchurch)

The Assembly considered a proposal that Section 9.1(1A) be fallen from. This was lost (90 for, 191 against).²⁹

2012 General Assembly (Rotorua)

The Assembly debated three similar proposals, which requested that Section 9.1(1A) to be fallen from (in one case, just locally, if 2/3 of the congregation agreed).³⁰ It was argued that the ruling is discriminatory, that in the Church there is a range of views that are held in good faith, and that there should be liberty of conviction. The proposals were lost.

2014 General Assembly (Auckland)

The Assembly received two proposals calling for the same outcomes as proposed in 2012.³¹ The motions were lost. Prior to the next Assembly, the outgoing Moderator called a Hui at Te Maungarongo Ohope Marae (August 2016).

2016 General Assembly (Dunedin)

Assembly again debated a proposal that it fall from the 2006 ruling.³² The motion was lost.

2018 General Assembly (Christchurch)

A parish proposed that Assembly request Presbyteries to obtain and distribute for study in all congregations multiple copies of a book on homosexuality called *Changing our Minds*.³³ The motion was lost.

2022 Special Assembly (on-line)

A proposal to Assembly 2021 calling for a 'fully inclusive' church was amended prior to the 2022 Special Assembly to read: 'That the Church commits to a dialogue on a way forward in a church divided over issues of sexuality, biblical morality and leadership'. The revised proposal was carried.³⁴

D. General Assembly decisions on marriage

1. 2012 General Assembly (Rotorua)

(a) Assembly resolved (75% for, 25% against)

'That General Assembly declares that it upholds the historic Christian understanding of marriage as the loving, faithful union of a man and a woman (reflecting the complementarity of male and a woman created in God's image), which is grounded in nature and in Scripture, is supremely revealed in Jesus' teaching about marriage, and is given by God for the well-being of human society...'.³⁵

(b) Assembly also resolved (77% for, 23% against):

'That, in faithfulness to the historic Christian understanding of marriage as grounded in the Bible and the teachings of Jesus and in consistency with previous resolutions of the General Assembly relating to marriage (1991 and 2004), General Assembly resolves that the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand does not support same-sex marriage...'.³⁶

2. 2014 General Assembly (Auckland)

Assembly resolved (153 for, 46 against) that:

'In consistency with its Christian doctrine of marriage, General Assembly declares that ministers of this church may conduct a marriage service only for the union of a man and woman', and that the proposal be sent down to the Church and brought back to the next Assembly under the Special Legislative Procedures.³⁷

3. 2016 General Assembly (Dunedin)

Assembly voted (60.15% in favour, 39.85% against) to enact the new regulation: (Book of Order 6.5. A) 'A minister may solemnize a marriage only between a man and a woman'.³⁸

ENDNOTES

All references are to official records of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

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- ¹ I gratefully acknowledge the work of Andrew Smith of the PCANZ Archives in supplying the many records I requested. Thanks also to Rev Dr Susan Jones for some comments and helpful suggestions on this document shortly before I finalised it.
- ² *Minutes of the General Assembly, 1968*: 167.
- ³ *Ibid*: 46-47.
- ⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly, 1974, in Reports of Committees and other Papers to be presented to the General Assembly 1975*: 115.
- ⁵ *Year Book 1986 and Proceedings of the General Assembly ...1985*: 127-8.
- ⁶ *Minutes of the 1991 General Assembly*: 81-125.
- ⁷ *Ibid*: 84.
- ⁸ This third clause was later referred to the Special Committee. *Ibid*: 121.
- ⁹ *General Assembly 1993, Minutes, Addenda to Reports and Other Papers*: 115.
- ¹⁰ *General Assembly 1994, Minutes, Addenda to Reports and Other Papers* 87.
- ¹¹ Report of the Decision of the Assembly Judicial Commission dated 25 August 1995.
- ¹² *General Assembly 1995. Minutes, Addenda to Reports, and Other Papers*: 48.
- ¹³ *Ibid*: 52.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*: 46.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*: 55.
- ¹⁶ *General Assembly 1996. Minutes, Addenda to Reports, and Other Papers*: 83.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*: 84-5.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*: 70.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*: 89.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*: 90; Referendum Ballot Paper, October 1997.
- ²¹ *General Assembly 1998 Minutes, Addenda to Reports, and Other Papers*: E15–19.
- ²² *Ibid*: 108, 110.
- ²³ *Ibid*: 110.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*.
- ²⁵ Report of the Book of Order and Judicial Committee, *1999 Extra Assembly Minutes, C4 -4*.
- ²⁶ *Minutes of the 2002 General Assembly*: 119.
- ²⁷ Judicial Commission Decision of the Appeal of D. Gordon and the Wellington Presbytery, Oct. 2003.
- ²⁸ *Minutes of the 2004 General Assembly*: 58-60, 80-86, 90-96.
- ²⁹ *Minutes of the 2010 General Assembly*: 62.
- ³⁰ *Minutes of the 2012 General Assembly*: 106-109.
- ³¹ *Minutes of the 2014 General Assembly*: 25-26. About 100 people had left the floor.
- ³² *Minutes of the 2016 General Assembly*: 23.
- ³³ *Minutes of the 2016 General Assembly*: 34.
- ³⁴ *Minutes of the 2022 Special Assembly*: 13.
- ³⁵ *Minutes of the 2012 General Assembly*: 111.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*: 112.
- ³⁷ *Minutes of the 2014 General Assembly*: 27-28.
- ³⁸ *Minutes of the 2016 General Assembly*: 19.

THINKING BIBLICALLY ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

A Statement prepared by the Doctrine Core Group, PCANZ

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

(Proverbs 1:2-7)

INTRODUCTION

That there is a wide spectrum of views in the church concerning matters of sexuality and faithful Christian discipleship is well known. Convictions are deeply held and carefully thought through across the spectrum of belief and it can be difficult sometimes to understand how Christians holding views that differ from our own can fail to uphold a particular biblical truth or to recognise a theological principle that seems to us to be of fundamental importance.

The author of the book of Proverbs supposes that the attainment of wisdom and understanding takes time. It requires discernment and skill; it requires attentiveness, careful listening, and, above all, fear of or reverence for the Lord. None of us can claim that we have concluded the process of attaining wisdom. There is an ongoing need for respectful dialogue and for prayerful attentiveness to God as we seek wisdom from Scripture and from one another in the matter of sexuality and Christian discipleship.

Our Presbyterian polity allows for 'freedom of opinion on matters that do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith'. Successive General Assemblies from 1965-71 defined the 'fundamental doctrines' of the Christian Faith as those expressed in the Apostles' Creed. They are the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of Scripture and its authority, the doctrine of God as Creator and sovereign Lord, the doctrines of Christ and his resurrection, the doctrines of divine judgement, eternal life, and the fulfillment of all things in Christ.

In this paper prepared by the Doctrine Core Group we seek to encourage awareness of the fact that people holding views on sexuality and leadership that differ from our own are no less committed than we are to upholding these fundamental doctrines, including Scripture's proper authority in all matters of faith and doctrine. It is important to recognise that none of us read Scripture by giving equal weight to every passage or verse. Our reading is guided by

particular conceptions of what constitutes the heart of the gospel. We give more or less weight to particular verses or passages in the light of broader theological convictions we hold about the person and work of Christ. We try to attend faithfully to Jesus' own reading of Scripture and to listen carefully to the theological principles that emerge through his teaching and example. People across the spectrum seek to do this with integrity and with prayerful attentiveness to the Word of the Lord, but they come to different conclusions. Our shared quest for wisdom and understanding remains a work in progress

The Doctrine Core Group presents below two statements outlining respectively a 'conservative' and a 'progressive' approach to the interpretation of Scripture in the matter of sexuality. The two statements represent the perspectives of just two authors. They are not definitive or exhaustive statements of the conservative or the progressive positions. Others holding similar views may wish to express them differently or to make very different points in defense of their particular view. But the two statements will serve, we hope, as demonstrations of the serious attempts made by people across the spectrum of belief to think theologically about the issues and to honour the authority of Scripture. The labels 'conservative' and 'progressive' are not ideal. Their use can encourage us to jump to conclusions about what others may think and believe. If we are to enter into genuine dialogue, however, we must resist the temptation to jump to conclusions. We must be ready to listen with humility to views that differ from our own and to recognise that there may be wisdom in the views of others that we have yet to learn.

A 'CONSERVATIVE' CONSIDERATION OF THE ISSUES

Conservatives consider their position on sexuality, biblical morality, and leadership to be authoritative because it is the result of a culturally and historically responsible reading of Scripture and is demonstrably the view of those who took the label 'Christian' from the beginning. Conservatives find their position compelling in that it helps them make sense of the many phenomena that they experience in the world. Below I shall attempt to demonstrate this with a quick look at three central texts and a brief engagement with some of the significant ideas that underpin the contemporary Christian discussion.

It is important for this forthcoming dialogue that participants are aware that conservatives do not agree that there are a range of legitimate biblical perspectives on this issue. There are not two faithful views on sexuality, biblical morality and leadership represented by the 'conservative' view and the 'progressive' view, but only one faithful view. As such, it is important to recognise the nature of the disagreement. For those who hold the conservative view, this is not ultimately about a disagreement within Christianity regarding sexuality but rather, it is about the acceptance of the Christian doctrine of Creation or its denial.¹

¹ If one denies the Christian doctrine of creation, then this has a domino effect into other non-negotiable aspects of Christian belief mentioned only briefly in this paper. Such doctrines include the creation of humans in the image of God, the fall. It also includes the call to be Jesus' disciples, and to be sign posts of the future in the present.

Genesis 1 tells the story of how God brought order out of chaos.² Throughout the chapter, chaos is expelled, and the order that God intentionally brings is in pairs with heaven and earth, light and darkness, and then eventually, male and female. It is significant for the conservative exegete that the order of creation is binary and comes to its climax in the creation of God's image as male and female.³ Part of God's command to his male and female image is to procreate and thus the ability to do so is essential for God's design for sexual relationships. This theme is traced through to Genesis 2:22 where God takes a part of the man's side and creates woman. Thus the marriage union is the coming together of a man and a woman and the drive that draws them together is mythologically spoken of as the reunion of a primordial unity – the union of two whose complementarity is derived from their mythological history.⁴ The story is highly polemical and set against the backdrop of alternative stories where the chaos of lived experience is the result of the gods' actions and the destinies they set (e.g., Enuma Elish).⁵ Significantly for the Genesis creation story, the chaos is ordered, and it is not until Genesis 3 that the order of God's creation is disrupted. This view of Israel's God as the creator of order out of chaos became one of the pillars of second Temple Judaism and stands behind what conservatives consider to be the binary logic of new creation in the New Testament. This binary 'creational' logic is what gives rise to the New Testament's teaching regarding the incarnation and the resurrected Jesus as the prototype of the new creation (1 Cor 15:20-23), when heaven and earth are, once again, brought together (Eph 1:10; Rev 21:1-3). It is what stands behind the New Testament's insistence that marriage between a man and a woman is supposed to be a signpost of the future coming together of Jesus and the Church (Eph 5:29-32). In the conservative view therefore, to deny this binary logic is not simply to deny a few isolated proof texts but the entire sweep of scripture from creation to new creation.

Matthew 19:1-12 contains Jesus' teaching on divorce and has Jesus citing texts from the creation story as he argues for his view on marriage and sexuality. Matthew 19:1-12 is important for our discussion for the following reasons. First, it portrays Jesus' opponents who argue from scripture for a more permissive view of divorce that conveniently suited their own cultural and male biases.⁶ Jesus' response gives the reader a methodological principle for

² In Genesis 1, chaos refers to disorder and a lack of purpose. Because chaos is not personified in Genesis 1, it does not contain the notion of evil like the personified chaos represented by Tiamat in Enuma Elish. John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 73-74.

³ That the author/s did not discuss the time between light and darkness (twilight) is an indication for the conservative exegete that Genesis 1 does not value that phenomenon when thinking about God's ordering of creation. Rather, Genesis 1 is interested in the binary order of God's creation.

⁴ Walton, *Genesis*, 178-79.

⁵ In Enuma Elish, the god Marduk defeats personified chaos - Tiamat – in a decisive battle and then creates the world out of her corpse. Walton, *Genesis*, 27, 29.

⁶ The culture at Jesus' time was highly patriarchal and in Jewish society it was men who were able to divorce their wives under the law, not the other way around. See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001), 251. In such a patriarchal society divorce was especially not good for woman. Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 252. Keener suggests that the phrase 'Have you never read' suggests that Jesus' opponents have searched scripture to justify their desired outcomes rather than read scripture in the light of God's revealed creative purpose. Keener suggests that Jesus is accusing his opponents of proof texting. See Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 465. The first century debate about divorce between the school of Shammai and Hillel is the background for this passage. The debate was around the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-3. The school of Shammai interpreted it as meaning that a man could divorce his wife for unfaithfulness while the school of Hillel interpreted it as meaning a man could

determining what is right when there are conflicting texts and huge contextual biases at play. Jesus' response creates a hierarchy of authoritative texts in such an instance, where the original purpose reflected in the creation narratives is more authoritative for determining God's intention than later texts that only existed, according to Jesus, because of human' weakness.⁷

A second reason why Matthew 19:1-12 is important is because of its use of the key word *porneia* which is a very broad term that captures within its scope all sexual activity outside of a heterosexual marriage.⁸ Jesus' point is that in the creation account, God intended marriage to be between a man and a woman and that the only permissible reason to break that union is if one of the members had been sexually active outside of that union.

Similarly, Paul grounds his sexual ethic in the creation narrative in Romans 1:18-28.⁹ Paul's argument in Romans 1:18-23 is that gentiles had also denied the value of the knowledge of God that can be obtained through creation (Rom 1:20).¹⁰ Paul, contrary to the Epicureans of his day and modern atheists, claims that the order in the physical world reveals that it has been intentionally created. Paul's view is that the creation indicates the existence of an invisible and immensely powerful divine creator (Rom 1:20), before whom the proper response is the giving of honour and thanks (Rom 1:21).¹¹ Paul develops his discussion of this knowledge of God that can be obtained through the created order in the direction of those who deny this knowledge. Upon the denial of this knowledge, people create false gods which can come in the form of created things (Rom 1:23) or as was common in Paul's day and in ours, in alternative worldview assumptions about the cosmos. This in turn leads directly to different assumptions regarding sexual ethics (Rom 1:25-28). Runge points out that Paul does not frame his discussion of homosexual and lesbian sex in terms of wickedness but as what is

divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever (even burning the bread). Jesus' opponents in Matthew 19 appear to be part of the school of Hillel and Jesus' interpretation lines up reasonably well with the school of Shammai. See Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 463, 465-66.

⁷ Davies and Allison put Jesus' argument as 'the created order is a guide for the moral order.' They also suggest that Jesus interprets Deuteronomy 24:1 through Malachi 2:16 and thereby subordinates Deuteronomy 24:1 to the creation account. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1997), 3, 10, 12-15. Similarly see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 486-87, 490. Keener, *Matthew*, 463.

⁸ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 492. Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 253-55. Keener, *Matthew*, 467-69. To get a sense of the broad scope of the use of *porneia* in the first century consider its use in the following sample of texts. *Porneia* can mean sex with a married woman (Testament of Joseph 3:8); adultery (Sirach 23:23); incest (Testament of Reuben 1:6) and homosexual sex (Sibylline Oracles 3: 764; 4:33-36). As such, when a text does not limit the scope of possible sexual acts when it uses *porneia*, it is best to take it generally as a reference to any sexual act outside of a heterosexual marriage (see Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 2:5 and Mark 7:21 as examples).

⁹ Paul speaks of the creation twice (Rom 1:20, 25), God as creator once (Rom 1:25) and refers to creation without using the word *ktisis* twice (Rom 1:19, 20). Paul also has the Genesis story of creation and fall (Gen 1-3) in the back of his mind throughout the pericope. This can be seen coming to the surface in places like Romans 1:22 where the people 'claim to be wise...' Similarly see N. T. Wright, 'Romans,' pages 393-770 in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. X (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 432-33. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, vol. 38A (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1988), 60.

¹⁰ Bird suggests that Romans 1:18-25 is allusive of Adam and Eve as he tells how pagans rehearse the primeval pairs descent into sin. Michael F. Bird, *Romans*, ed. Scott McKnight (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 53.

¹¹ Wright, 'Romans,' 432. Bird, *Romans*, 56. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 57-59.

against nature.¹² That the notion of something being ‘against nature’ is grounded in an understanding of the way the world was designed to work can be found in numerous other ancient authors.¹³ Thus, Paul’s understanding of heterosexual relations between a man and his wife as *physikos* ‘natural,’ and of same sex intercourse as *para physin* ‘against nature,’ is grounded in his understanding of creation. Thus, for Paul, the denial of God as the creator creates a vacuum that is filled with idolatry and leads (to borrow Paul’s language) to an ‘unnatural’ sexual ethic – that is a sexual ethic not grounded in the doctrine of creation.¹⁴

This notion of a *natural* sexual ethic that is based firmly in the Genesis creation accounts, and observable in both Jesus’ and Paul’s use of those creation accounts when discussing sexuality, is significant for conservatives. It is the notion that God created the world with intention and purpose that underlies their view of the normality of heterosexual relationships. However, equally important is their view that acceptance of an *unnatural* sexual ethic flows from the denial of the Christian doctrine of creation. Catherine Wilson has argued for an increasing influence of Epicureanism since the rediscovery of Lucretius, and the grounding of much modern philosophy in its tenets.¹⁵ Wright contends that Epicureanism displaced deism in 18th century England as the dominant way of conceiving of the relationship between God/ the gods and the cosmos.¹⁶ This neo-Epicureanism was then proven, in the eyes of many, with the triumph of Darwinism in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁷ This neo-Epicureanism claims that

¹² Steven E. Runge, *Romans: A Visual and Textual Guide* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 30. Similarly see Bird, *Romans*, 60.

¹³ ‘Philo and Josephus both refer to homosexual relations as ‘contrary to nature’ (*para physin*) in several places (Josephus, *Apion* 2.273; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 3.38; *Abraham* 133–36). Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.199) even states that the marriage of a man and a woman is ‘according to nature’ (*kata physin*) whereas a ‘mixing’ (*mixis*) of male and male is abhorred by the law and deserving of death. The author of *T. Naph* 3.3–4 considers homosexuality a departure ‘from the order of nature.’ Ovid (*Metam.* 9.758) refers to a girl who loved another girl, yet she knew that ‘nature does not will it.’ Plato (*Laws* 1.2 [636 BC]) regarded sexual relations between same-sex couples as ‘contrary to nature.’ See Bird, *Romans*, 60, footnote 21.

¹⁴ Similarly see Bird, *Romans*, 53. Runge notes ‘They have rejected the created order of things that God set in place from the beginning.’ See Runge, *Romans*, 24–25. Paul’s view is shared by the author of Wisdom of Solomon who also suggests that idolatry – confusion regarding the creator and creation – leads to fornication (See Wisdom of Solomon 14:12). Similarly see Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 63.

¹⁵ In her book Wilson demonstrates the growing influence of Epicureanism on 17th century philosophy. See Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 35. Wilson points to the triumph of Epicureanism in that ‘The central premises of the Epicurean system were its denial that any supernatural agents engage in the design, generation, maintenance, or moral regulation of the world; its assertion that self-moving, subvisible material particles acting blindly, without intention or purpose, bring about all growth, change, and decline; and its insistence that the point of ethical discipline and self-denial could only be the minimization of mental and physical suffering... The success of Epicureanism can be measured by the extent to which the universities abandoned, as they did to a remarkable extent, their role as centres for the study of incorporeal entities and eschatological and miraculous states of affairs. They became instead institutions devoted to the close and careful examination and remodelling of the material and social worlds and devoted as well to the cultivation of intellectual and sensory pleasures and the remediation of pain and deprivation.’ Wilson, *Epicureanism*, 37–8.

¹⁷ Taylor points to the evolutionary aspects of Lucretius’ thought in his comment ‘Lucretius in the ancient world offered an ‘evolutionary’ picture, of animals and humans arising by spontaneous generation out of the soil.’ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 328. Wright points out that Darwin’s idea of survival of the fittest gave a *telos* in the biological realm for the unguided, chaotic universe of the neo-Epicurean. See Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 61. Greenblatt notes how Epicureanism had decisively impacted Darwin’s grandfather - Erasmus Darwin. He notes how Charles Darwin could leave Lucretius’ poem *On the Nature of Things* unread because he had already thoroughly absorbed the Epicurean

the perceived order in the cosmos is the result of the chaotic movement of atoms in space.¹⁸ This notion of chaos as the creator of the cosmos leads directly to the view that there is no intention for our sexuality.¹⁹ After all, if chaos is our creator, then we should expect chaos in every facet of the cosmos including our sexuality.²⁰ If we live in a chaotic universe rather than an ordered universe, then there is no ontologically right way to be in the universe for there is no governing purpose or order. Thus, conservatives regard the views of those who argue for the more 'progressive view' on sexuality with deep suspicion. For conservatives, this progressive view is the result of denying the Christian doctrine of creation, allowing the vacuum to be filled by the dominant neo-Epicureanism of western culture, and results in the outcome of an 'unnatural' sexual ethic.

Purpose has always been a key aspect of the Christian doctrine of creation. In summarising the universal Christian belief on creation Olsen notes 'If God is good then he created with a purpose. A randomly and capriciously wrought world would not be the work of a good God.'²¹

view of the cosmos. See Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 262.

¹⁸ Taylor highlights the impact that one of the central tenets of Epicureanism has had on the modern self that is of relevance to modern conversations on sexuality. Epicureans have long argued that the knowledge that all that exists is the result of atoms swerving randomly about frees people from the fear of death and retribution in the afterlife. It does this because it frees people from any purpose outside of themselves. God/ the gods, if they are there, have little interest in what happens on earth. They have prepared no destiny for people, nor have they preprogrammed creation to be in any purposed way. As such, any purpose that the modern self gets, he gets from within. Instead of looking outside of oneself (to God or creation) for purpose and meaning, the triumph of Epicureanism drove modern people to look inside themselves to figure out who they are, and to then express what they find as their meaning. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 367. Grant argues that the 'popular mentality rises from the recent movement of the 'culture of authenticity' into mainstream society. Modern authenticity encourages us to create our own beliefs and morality, the only rule being that they must resonate with who we feel we really are. The worst thing we can do is to conform to some moral code that is imposed on us from the outside – by society, our parents, the church or whoever else. It is deemed to be self-evident that any such imposition would undermine our unique identity. Ultimately, this form of expressive individualism, with each person doing his or her own thing, leads to a form of soft moral relativism.' Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualised Age* (Grand Rapids MI: BrazosPress, 2015), 30.

¹⁹ Taylor notes that Lucretius has provided much of the polemic against the Christian position on sexuality. For Lucretius, the denial of sexual desires is wrong and unhealthy. Sexual desire is something that ought to be expressed. Taylor notes that this sentiment begins with Epicurus and Lucretius, and is reinvigorated by Voltaire and Nietzsche before becoming the dominant assumption about sexuality in the modern western world. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 626. Grant notes that by the early 20th century 'Sex was no longer something we chose to engage in or abstain from but was now a natural force that was either embraced or denied, leading to either health/wholeness or a repressed/diseased self. The sexualisation of personal identity involved the bringing together of desire, morality, and a sense of integrity.' See Grant, *Divine Sex*, 36.

²⁰ Epicureanism and Christianity account for the realities experienced outside of a binary view of creation differently. The Christian view, according to conservatives, is that God ordered his creation in a binary way and that experiences outside of that binary order are accounted for by the Christian doctrine of the fall. However, for the Epicurean, as Wright nicely summarises 'There is no 'problem of evil'...; the world is what it is. We may not like it, but to assess the 'morality' of what happens in a random universe is to ask a meaningless question.' See Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 43. Thus for the Epicurean, experiences outside of a binary view of creation are to be expected and are equally as valid as straight experiences. After all, chaos has no purpose.

²¹ Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 162. Langdon Gilkey summarises the Christian view of creation in his book *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959) as 'God is the source of all that there is; creatures are dependent yet real and good; and God creates in freedom and with purpose.'

As such, if sexuality (as part of God's good creation) has a purpose, then there is a correct way for sexuality to be used. Thus, the conservative position on sexuality suggests first, that a Christian view on sexuality must propose a purpose for sexuality (right and wrong sexual expressions) for it to remain within the boundaries of Christian belief on creation.²² Then second, that the best sources for determining God's purpose for sexuality is in scripture and scripture's grounding of the ethics of sexuality in creation.²³ A Christian leader must be someone of strong Christian faith, who understands the Gospel and therefore seeks to live a life in line with God's revealed purposes (ethics).

A 'PROGRESSIVE' CONSIDERATION OF THE ISSUES

It should be a clear warning sign for the Church, when a particular doctrinal position, however well intentioned, causes harm to people. In recent years, the stories of rainbow people reveal the harm caused by a traditionalist Christian ethic on sexuality and gender. Each story is unique and deserves to be heard and taken seriously.²⁴

A common theme to the stories of rainbow Christians is that their sexual orientation or gender identity are irreconcilable with traditional Christian doctrine because a core, involuntary, and unchangeable aspect of their identity is invalidated as a distortion of God's intended order of things.²⁵ This irreconcilable tension gives rise to feelings of guilt, shame, and self-loathing.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, many choose to leave their faith behind and never darken the door of a church again.

The alarm bells should be ringing. As Mark Achtemeier points out, the consistent message of scripture is that the result of faithfully following God's word is *life* (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Further, obedience to God's law is the path to happiness (Psalm 1:1-4).²⁷ If the result of

²² By definition then the Christian sexual ethic is exclusive.

²³ I suspect that the one point of agreement between the 'conservative' and the 'progressive' view on sexuality is that the Church has much need for improvement in how it has cared pastorally for people who experience same sex attraction, etc. There is a great need for research into the pastoral care of these people to be undertaken. But this research must be done from within a Christian view of creation rather than the neo-Epicureanism that pervades so much of the research to date. This research would seem especially relevant in the wake of the recent ban on conversion therapy and would hopefully result in better outcomes.

²⁴ Cf. 'Counting Ourselves' (2019), the first comprehensive national survey of health and wellbeing of trans and nonbinary people in Aotearoa New Zealand: https://countingourselves.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Counting-Ourselves_FINAL.pdf

The section on the impact of Religion is short but points to two common experiences: first, a significant number of trans people leave church for fear of being judged; and, second, the faith of those who find a *welcoming* and *inclusive* community is an immense support in their coming-out.

²⁵ While a little out-of-date now, Stuart Edser helpfully outlines for a Christian audience the shift in scientific understanding of homosexuality in the last few decades. Our knowledge has continued to expand but his basic point still stands: being gay (and, by extension today, LGBTQIA+) is not a choice. This basic fact is now widely recognised in churches with many traditionalist churches advocating lifelong celibacy as the default biblical faithful response to one's queerness i.e. you can't change your orientation, but you can suppress your desire! Stuart Edser, *Being Gay, Being Christian: You can be both* (Wollombi, NSW: Exisle Publishing, 2012), 49-58.

²⁶ Cf. Mark Achtemeier, 'The Harvest of Despair: why traditional condemnations of gay relationships can't be right', in *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage* (Louisville: WJK, 2014), 1-16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

following a particular interpretation of God's law is psychological distress, depression, and – at worst – suicide, then perhaps that interpretation of the law is not of God. Perhaps the Church has misinterpreted God's law.

The issue of *interpretation – hermeneutics* – gets to the heart of the matter. The stories of rainbow people may indeed be a gift to the Church:²⁸ a wake-up call from the wilderness to repent and believe as we learn to live faithfully together in obedience to God's life-giving Word.²⁹

A resurrection hermeneutic

Every person has a hermeneutic, stated or unstated. The Reformed conviction that scripture is supremely authoritative for our faith and life does not solve the issue of hermeneutics. We all make choices about *which* scripture passages to give greater weight, *how* to interpret and apply those passages, and *which* dots to join to create overarching narratives and frameworks for our doctrine and practice.³⁰

The question, then, is *how* to faithfully interpret scripture. This is a constant task as the Church in every generation seeks to respond to the issues of its day by listening to the guidance of the Spirit in accordance with the scriptures and with the aid of our tradition.

Jesus had a hermeneutic. He would frequently enter into dialogue with scribes and Pharisees over the interpretation of particular scriptures. Often he would go beyond the letter of the law to challenge exclusionary or legalistic readings (e.g. Matt 9:14-17, Matt 12:9-14). He gave greater weight to certain parts of scripture (cf. Luke 4:16ff.) over others. In other words, Jesus

²⁸ The problem, as Elizabeth Stuart points out, is that the experiences of queer Christians are often not heard in the Church resulting in a heteronormative and cisnormative theology (i.e. binary views of sexuality and gender are normalised, privileged, absolutised, and even idolised – that is, written into the nature of God). In hearing the stories of queer Christians, the situatedness of hetero- and cis- perspectives are revealed as partial and incomplete. In short, diversity of experience unveils our own blindspots (Elizabeth Stuart, 'Learning to trust our own experience,' in *Religion is a Queer Thing* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 20-28).

²⁹ Marcella Althaus-Reid argues that the fluidity of queer identity is 'nomadic, unsettled ... constantly on the move' and as such 'destabilises ideals of Christian ethics', namely 'an idealist, heterosexual transcendental position'. (Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 44. In this sense, queer perspectives are a nomadic voice 'out of the wilderness'.

³⁰ David Gushee helpfully outlines how the traditionalist position, which is dependent on joining certain scriptural dots, is a variation on the following: Gen 1-2, Gen 19, Lev 18:22/20:13, Judg 19, Matt 19:1-12, Rom 1:26-27, 1 Cor 6:9/1 Tim 1:10, Eph 5:22-33. David Gushee, *Changing our mind*, 2nd ed. (Canton: Read the Spirit Books, 2015), 54-57.

The two theological claims that emerge are 1) the male/female sexual/gender complementarity is God's intended order of things, and 2) homosexuality is an abomination or distortion of God's order. There are many examples of quality biblical exegesis exploring the context of these verses and why they *shouldn't* be applied to modern conversations about sexuality and gender. Gushee, (*Changing our mind*), and Achtemeier (*The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*) provide good overviews. NT Wright points out that the Church must be wary of applying words ending in -ity and -ism (e.g. homosexuality) to scripture because these are modern conceptual abstractions invented in the nineteenth century. To read these *into* the biblical texts and to then apply these texts (e.g. Judges 19) as a kind of proof-texting seems to some Christians to be a highly problematic form of eisegesis.

demonstrated a highly-selective *Christ-centred hermeneutic*, interpreting the Hebrew scriptures in light of himself.

This is most clear in the Road to Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35), in which the risen Jesus journeys unrecognised with two disciples on their way to Emmaus. They are still mourning his death and his missing body. Responding to their grief, Jesus engages in a process of scriptural interpretation: 'Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.'

The key thing to note here is that the risen Jesus is the starting point for interpreting the Bible. We read the Bible through a *resurrection lens*. Developing a resurrection hermeneutic has profound implications for the Church's ethic of sexuality and gender.

1. Interpretation as living testimony of the Spirit

Significantly, the disciples were unable to join the dots together themselves. Their eyes were closed until the living Christ interpreted the scriptures to them. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we too are 'on the way', seeking to understand our faith in the risen Christ. Faithful interpretation of scripture is dependent on Christ himself opening our eyes by the Holy Spirit. For this reason, John Calvin stressed that the authority of scripture is dependent on the living testimony of the Holy Spirit.³¹

A Church that takes into account the living testimony of the Holy Spirit will refrain from enshrining a fixed, once-and-for-all, plain meaning of scripture with its own 'self-evident' logic. It will recognise the perspectival nature of all understandings of the truth and the contestability of interpretations of truth.³²

Just because the Church's doctrine or tradition has tended to historically favour one interpretation does not discount the possibility of other valid interpretations. Nor does it mean that the Church has not been mistaken, blinded by its own culturally-bound perspectives and limited understanding. At the very *least*, we must remain open to the fact that the Church may have focused too much on one reading of the scriptures in its interpretation of issues of sexuality and gender.

Such an admission would hardly be scandalous: orthodox Christian doctrine has often changed in response to new developments in science and culture. Take, for example, the scientific discovery that the world revolves around the sun; or that life on earth evolved over billions of years rather than seven literal days of creation.³³ Consider the abolition of slavery or more recently the decision to open ordination to women. In each of these cases, changing circumstances led the Church to revise its traditional interpretation of scripture. Far from being a betrayal of the authority of scripture, our understanding has deepened and matured.

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.vii.5

³² See Janet Martin Soskice, 'The truth looks different from here' or On seeking the unity of truth from a diversity of perspectives', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 73(865), 1992, 528-542

³³ Gushee, *Changing our mind*, 91ff.

2. Scripture as memoir

On the Road to Emmaus, the risen Christ interprets the Hebrew scriptures through the lens of resurrection. In other words, scripture is read *backwards* like a memoir. A memoir is written towards the *end* of someone's life and consists in *retrospectively* making sense of the events of that life. This perspective can *only* be gained at the end by looking back and seeing the trends that led to that point.³⁴

It is not only Jesus who reads scripture in this way. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was an inexplicable, world-shattering event. The New Testament authors try to make sense of this life-changing reality by reaching back into the Hebrew scriptures, finding images and metaphors, expanding upon them, and understanding them afresh under the guidance of the Spirit and in the light of Christ.

David Gushee talks about paradigm-leaps in the church's interpretation of scripture that arise from surprising and transformative encounters with the living God.³⁵ Paul's transformative encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus led to a complete paradigm shift in his reading and use of scripture.³⁶ The resurrection of Christ has, for him, ushered in a new creation.

Douglas Campbell makes a convincing argument that this new paradigm can be summed up by Paul's famous ethical statement in Galatians 3: *There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*³⁷ While there is debate in biblical scholarship as to whether this list should be treated exhaustively or not, the underlying point is that the categories of the old Adam, by which we define our existence now, are *no longer ultimately definitive for someone's identity or grounds for exclusion from the Church.* Life in the new Adam supersedes the old.³⁸

³⁴ Douglas Campbell unpacks this basic point in *The Triumph of God's Love: Pauline Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), 72-91. Campbell contrasts a 'memoir' retrospective reading of scripture with a 'quest' progressive reading of scripture. A 'quest' reading (like *The Lord of the Rings*) *begins* with the problem and proceeds in a linear fashion towards the solution. In this way, the *problem* predetermines the reader's expectations of the story and the eventual solution.

³⁵ Gushee, *Changing our mind*, 106-111.

³⁶ For Paul, the new creation is anticipated now through the transformation and renewal of our minds (cf. 2 Cor 4-5, Rom 12:2). Richard Hays explains how Paul helped the early Gentile church to *think* eschatologically by placing them within the story of Israel. He thus used the Hebrew scriptures to shape the identity and expectations of the Church, which lives in anticipation of the new creation. This highly creative and poetic use of scripture *begins* with the eschatological reality of resurrection in Christ and reads scripture *retrospectively*. Hays looks to Paul to carve out a third way of reading scripture between the two options that tend to dominate the Church: the first is the liberal 'demythologizing' hermeneutic; the second is the conservative 'literalist' hermeneutic. So Hays argues: 'in contrast to the demythologizing hermeneutic, Paul celebrated Scripture's witness to the real and radical apocalyptic action of God in the world; in contrast to the literalist hermeneutic, Paul engaged Scripture with imaginative freedom, without the characteristic modernist anxiety about factuality and authorial intention.' Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), viii-xvii.

³⁷ Douglas Campbell, 'Some thoughts on the Apostle Paul and ethics' in *More than a Single Issue*, ed. Murray Rae & Graham Redding (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 2000), 77-94.

³⁸ Beverley Gaventa helpfully points to the centrality of the birthing imagery in Romans 8. The old creation is 'groaning in labour pains' in anticipation of the new, redeemed creation. There is continuity but, as Gaventa notes, there is also radical discontinuity. The glorious apocalyptic unveiling of the children of God is scarcely

Paul is clear that this new reality 'in Christ' is not *only* an undoing of humanity's sinful rebellion: it is the fulfilment of God's original intention for creation all along! Christ is God's wisdom (1 Cor 1:24) and 'the creative principle at the foundation of the *present* universe; the one through whom, by whom and for whom all things were made' (cf. Col 1:15-16, 1 Cor 8:6).³⁹

If we follow Paul (and Jesus) in *beginning* with the new creation in Christ and applying a *memoir* method to our interpretation of scripture, then we must be wary of constructing an ethic of sexuality and gender that *begins* with the old creation and *then* proceeds to write this ordering of things into the *new creation*. For instance, in Genesis 1-3, it is easy to read a gender complementarity into the order of creation and from here to assume that this is God's ultimate, intended order of things.

But to our peril. A theological ethic of creation, which proceeds on the grounds that 'this is the way things have been made by God', has been used to damning effect to justify, for example, slavery in the British Empire. On these grounds, Dietrich Bonhoeffer abandoned Luther's language of 'orders of creation'.⁴⁰

In short, while a traditionalist binary view of sexuality and gender is derived from scripture, Paul's ethic of the new creation (as outlined in Gal 3:28) *at the very least* gives us good reason to question whether this is indeed the way God intended things to be in the fullness of time.

What are we to make, though, of the passages in Paul's letters that seem to endorse a traditionalist Christian ethic of sexuality and gender? Douglas Campbell argues that some of Paul's statements warrant reinterpretation *on the basis of Paul's own argument*.⁴¹ Paul's language of the ordering of the new creation 'in Christ' provides hermeneutical justification for challenging his apparent endorsement of the old ordering of creation (e.g. slavery or a patriarchal view of marriage). It is not contentious to challenge Paul's views on slavery along these lines and yet the Church has been hesitant to apply the same hermeneutical logic to issues of sexuality and gender.

3. Marriage as an image of God's self-giving love

One of the main reasons for this is that marriage is a central and recurring *theological* image in scripture that describes something fundamental about God's relationship with the world and about the inner logic of creation and redemption.

imaginable – and yet all creation *now* is agitated by its coming. The point is an important one: we do not read the old creation *into* the new creation. Rather, the resurrection imagination of life in the *new* creation shapes and informs the Church's ethics in the present age. Beverley Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: WJK, 2007), 51-62

³⁹ Campbell, 'Some thoughts on the Apostle Paul and ethics', 88.

⁴⁰ Gushee, *Changing our mind*, 95.

⁴¹ This is an example of *Sachkritik*, that is, interpreting scripture passages in light of the gospel that the author intended to communicate. In this case, one is 'reading Paul in light of Paul', giving certain passages greater weight than others. Campbell, *The Triumph of God's Love*, 7-8.

Important passages include Genesis 1-2 (when God creates humankind in the divine image), Isaiah 62:4b-5 (which describes God's 'marriage' to the people of Israel), Ephesians 5:22-33 (which describes Christ's relationship with the Church as a marriage), and Revelation 19:7-10 (which envisions the marriage feast of the Lamb at the new creation of heaven and earth). In this paradigm, the love that binds people together in marriage is an image of the love that has existed for eternity in the heart of God. Marital love is *like* God's covenantal relationship with the world.

The question is whether the male/female sexual/gender complementarity of marriage is central or incidental to the inner logic of the metaphor. A traditionalist approach argues it is central and cannot be done away with. Such an assertion places a lot of weight on Genesis 1:27: *So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

In Genesis 1, the creation of the world is described in a series of complementary binaries that are 'meant' to work together. This poetic construction comes to a climax in the creation of humankind as 'male and female'. On these grounds, it is often argued that the gender complementarity of humankind is reflective of God's good ordering of the cosmos – an order, which comes to final consummation in the marriage of Christ and the Church at the centre of the new heaven and earth.

However, the argument for the centrality of gender complementarity is problematic for two reasons. First, the binary poetic device at the heart of Genesis, while theologically profound, is a vast oversimplification of the nature of reality. When it comes to the cosmos, for instance, we are quick to recognise that these binaries are poetic devices articulating one kind of theological truth and should not be used as a scientific description of empirical reality.⁴² Yet, for some reason, the Church has been far more reticent to recognise that sexuality and gender might also be far more complex than the Bible describes in Genesis 1.

The second reason is that it projects human norms of gender and sexuality onto God. The human covenant of marriage is an image of God's love supremely revealed in Christ – not the other way around! If we begin with the love of God revealed in Christ, there is nothing inherently *gendered* about the marriage metaphor. Mark Achtemeier points out that the primary function of the marriage metaphor is a description of the complete and utter self-giving of Jesus Christ.⁴³ In the incarnate Christ, God has become one with humankind, bound to our life and to our death, taking on all that is ours and giving to us all that is God's. The marriage metaphor describes this miraculous exchange, this unconditional bond of love, and this bodily self-giving epitomised in the eucharistic words: *This is my body, given for you.*⁴⁴

⁴² I.e. there is not only day and night, there is also twilight; there is not only land and sea, there are also wetlands, rivers, deserts, forests etc.

⁴³ Achtemeier, *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*, 43-56.

⁴⁴ Sarah Coakley's excellent book, *The New Asceticism*, contains a chapter on the gender subversion of women who preside over Holy Communion. She explores the gendered imagery (both male and female) at the heart of the eucharistic drama. Christ as our High Priest both represents God to the people and the people to God. In this way, Christ himself as presider over the Table, plays both a 'masculine' and 'feminine' role. This gender fluidity within the inner logic of the eucharistic liturgy does not result in the dissolution of gender – but it also

It is significant that the road to Emmaus story ends with the disciples recognising Jesus as he breaks bread with them. So too for the Church. At the Lord's Table, we are awakened to the presence of the living Christ with us and with *all* who gather alongside us; we are invited to remember with joy and thanksgiving the self-giving love of Christ, even unto death; and we look forward in hope to the marriage feast of the Lamb and the new creation when there will be neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female – for all will be one in Christ Jesus.

Finding the risen Christ in *fellowship with one another around the table*, is a reminder for the Church that our way forward is together. May the Church find a way to witness even in our division to the unity we share in Christ Jesus.

moves beyond a clear binary distinction. Coakley, *The New Asceticism* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015). See also: Coakley, *God, Sexuality & the Self* (Cambridge: University Press, 2013).