

DISCERNING THE SPIRIT, BAPTIZING THE CULTURE

By Peter Slater

When I was interviewed for appointment as Professor of Theology at Wycliffe College in 1982, I was asked in what sense I considered myself an evangelical. I answered that, if by "evangelical" we mean biblical, I was and am, since my theological starting-point is the biblical theology that I learned at Cambridge from Henry Chadwick, C.F.D. Moule, and C.H. Dodd's *According to the Scriptures*. Only after I got to Wycliffe did I discover that, for some there, biblical theology meant sixteenth century Calvinist biblical theology and its offshoots. The same biblical phrases had quite different connotations for us, depending on what training we brought to our discussions of texts. The Anglican Communion today is paying for neglecting training its people in biblical theology.

My time at Wycliffe taught me that non-evangelicals seldom realize what a wrenching betrayal of biblical tradition it seems, to many evangelicals, to conclude that homosexual intercourse is anything but unnatural, immoral and sacrilegious. Conservative evangelicals are being asked to renounce their traditions of biblical interpretation, which include taking the plain meaning of unambiguous texts, such as those on "homosexuality," at face value.

How we relate the message of these texts to others in the Bible is where sincere and informed Anglicans diverge. At issue, theologically, is the doctrine of creation and, religiously, what it means to be faithful to our traditions concerning what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Where disingenuity or self-deception creep in is in the extent to which we fail to admit that contexts and cultural norms colour all our own and others' reasoning and reading of texts. The Holy Spirit allows no shortcuts to loving God with our minds, that is, thinking through our priorities in our own times and places, with Scriptures in one hand and prayers for all our neighbours' welfare in the other.

Concerning the doctrine of creation, what nineteenth century theologians learnt with difficulty was that the Book of Genesis is not a textbook in the natural

sciences. We turn to the Bible for guidance in obeying the twofold love commandment in a fallen world, not for our cosmology. To modern discoveries in physics and geology, we must now add others in physiology and neurology to gain a fully informed understanding of what is natural. All biblical theology affirms that whatever is natural is good as such, though subject to abuse. If reputable scientists find grounds to support some fellow Christians' claims to be same-sex oriented by nature, not by choice, then we have to be open to the possibility that their orientation is meant for their and our good.

The doctrine of creation today has developed, not only in reaction to scientific conclusions drawn from God's Book of Nature, but also in connection with the Book of History, which is much more ambiguous. One historic shift, more in Euro-American countries than in those with large Muslim populations, is from emphasis on traditional tribal identities to affirmation of individual personhood, each one of us having rights enshrined in national constitutions, including some right to differ. Regarding rules governing personal behaviour, the assumption that one size fits all can no longer be taken for granted.

The cultural conceptions assumed in the Bible are those of ancient communities, not unique to Israel. We are no more committed to uncritical acceptance of their conceptions of sexual relations found among biblical authors than we are to their conceptions of heaven and earth. What the Bible does is recontextualize those cultures within the framework of its ongoing story of creation, fall, exodus and new life in community, culminating in the experience of the gift of Jesus' spirit, inseparable from the Holy Spirit, attested in the New Testament.

We are not bound to uncritical acceptance of modern conceptions either, if they prove contrary to moral principles grounded in biblical theology. Our responsibility is to live what it means to say, in Johannine terminology, that the Risen Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If we follow Archbishop William Temple's lead, thinking of ours as a sacramental universe, then we have, so to speak, to "baptize" whatever natures we are given and whatever cultures we

bring to our readings of Scripture. The current dispute over blessing same-sex commitments to lifelong fidelity to one partner proves that the baptismal process has barely begun on this subject.

Baptism entails a pattern of dying to old ways and being raised to new life, culminating in communal reconciliation, when together we "put on" the Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Our cultural predilections show when we give priority to form or order over dynamics or growth, or *vice versa*. "Way" and "Life" suggest dynamic interaction, but what about "Truth"? In uncertain times, we tend to privilege law and order. It helps to remember that the one unforgivable sin – the sin against the Holy Spirit – is interpreting our rules to call what is good (Jesus healing on the Sabbath) demonic (Mark 3:1-30).

When discussing the "development" of doctrine, a classic cultural assumption is that we are dealing with timeless truth, not timely truth. Unless the kernels of later developments can be located somewhere in Scripture, some consider them illicit. We owe the idea of eternal, unchanging truth more to the Platonism of the early Church Fathers than to the salvation-history taught by the Hebrew prophets. Perhaps our sense of tradition should be more dynamic.

Since we have to have some philosophy, opting for archaic conceptions does not disqualify classical conclusions. But it does rule out classicists' dismissal of every modern interpretation of texts on the grounds that the latter is culturally derived. Our reality is a mixture of cultures not readily harmonized. For many it includes an unbaptized Freudian belief that all sexual repression is unhealthy, while among others there is a lingering monastic conviction that the purest form of love is disembodied.

What often muddies baptismal waters are essentialistic definitions of terms such as marriage, sexual desire, doctrine and tradition. To say that sexual desire was aroused only after "the Fall," for instance, and therefore cannot be included within the new life of the baptized community, is an example of essentialistic thinking. It abstracts talk of desire from the spirit of the relationships of those involved, privileging the letter of past beliefs.

"Truth" in faithful living is more a matter of truing our relationships to God, self, and neighbours, than of reiterating the conclusions of ancient arguments. Consequently, traditions of discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit should be construed more in terms of processes than of fixed positions. Being true to tradition means making our own judgments in our time in the same way as our predecessors in faith did in theirs. We may or may not concur with their convictions about moral issues to do, for instance, with sexual relations or slavery.

With regard to the questions posed for the Primate's Theological Commission, neither a blanket authorization nor rejection of blessing all same sex unions is consistent with traditional Protestant understandings of the relationship between Law and Gospel. Whether any union should be blessed depends on the kind of on-site discernment that used to be exercised by matrimonial commissions (when functioning properly), regarding divorced persons wishing to marry new partners. The question always is: does this particular relationship show evidence of the gifts of the Spirit?

A biblical paradigm for the process of making faithful judgments on others' relationships is found in Acts 15. Today it might lead us to ask a conservative Nigerian and a South American archbishop to live with a community of professing Christian "same-sex" couples in North America for a year or two, and then to report back on whether or not the daily lives of the majority of such couples manifest any "fruits of the Spirit." Only in the light of such firsthand witnessing do we know which biblical texts most pertain to the questions raised.

An essentialistic, conclusion-driven argument about Scripture and tradition might find no analogy between what the apostles in Jerusalem decided about Gentile converts' life-styles and modern same sex partnerships. It might invoke only one part of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, to assert that the different "language games" being played have different rules, claiming that the rules of this world do not apply in "the biblical world" which is our norm. But

Wittgenstein realized that no single rule covers all family resemblances. To this Bakhtin added that the wisdom of living discourse is never frozen or final.

Each party in a genuine dialogue needs to find his or her own voice, while listening for God's voice in and through how others confess their mutual faith. God speaks through the prophets, not as a ventriloquist, but as a ruler entrusting emissaries on the spot to choose words from local languages that best communicate God's will for all. As F. D. Maurice suggested, we are more likely to hear God's voice in what others affirm than in what they deny.

For me personally, a same sex relationship would be unnatural and repulsive. My clearest sense that this might not be so for everybody came from a former student with AIDS. A lapsed Southern Baptist, he had led a secular life involving hundreds of sexual encounters. He was converted back to Christianity by an Anglican chaplain, who told him that his promiscuous relationships were sinful, but that his being gay was not. (The chaplain no more asked him than she asked "straight" couples what they did in bed.) Her injunction to go and sin no more led him to seek a single partner to whom he could be faithful. He wanted the spiritual grace of a public blessing to give them strength to keep their vows.

When we talk of tradition and the development of doctrine, we can put the accent on conformity to past cultural norms or on transforming all culture, when we seek to proclaim healing news to all God's creatures. Whether we describe any two partners as "married" depends on current linguistic usage. It is not a doctrinal matter. But our linguistic choices reflect how we think of situations other than our own. Learning to celebrate our differences as part of the glory of God's creation is a doctrinal matter.

The biblical promise is not that we shall wake up in the Garden of Eden but that every day, as we die a little and live a little in this world, a new world grows among us that is true to God's intention in making us different. Baptizing our culture concerning the sexual side of life means saying No to promiscuity and Yes to partners who ask our help in becoming faithful members of the Body of Christ. That is our best tradition to follow in sexual theology.