

‘Grace, Licence and the Homosexuality Debate’ delivered by the Revd Dr Andrew Goddard, Tutor in Christian Ethics, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford at NEAC4, 22nd September 2003.

Over the last few weeks as this evening drew ever closer there were times when I wondered if I had gone totally mad in accepting the invitation to speak. Twenty minutes on the hottest subject in the church and with the most important theological work – exposition of Scripture – already done by others.

Thankfully, I’ve recently been at discussions in evangelical churches in Oxford diocese and gained a sense as to the issues and concerns. There is sadness we’re having to debate this issue in this way but also an eagerness to struggle with its complexities and challenges so we can bear faithful witness to the gospel. Some are quite clear what they believe and why. Others are uncomfortable with the way as evangelicals and a wider church we are handling it. In thinking how to put all that together, this evening’s title gives us a handle on it all – Grace, Licence and the Homosexuality Debate. Drawing particularly on the CEEC’s St Andrew’s Day Statement from 1995 and the booklet ‘True Union in the Body?’ I want to think about the key words and phrase in that title – Grace, Licence, Homosexuality Debate.

Rightly our first word is GRACE. As evangelicals we should know about grace. The CEEC’s statement of faith is structured around ‘grace’. Someone who in some ways drew me into this debate was my tutor at Cranmer Hall, Michael Vasey. In his book *Strangers and Friends* there was much I disagreed with but he writes these important words – ‘There is significant agreement that gay people need to begin any thinking about their way of life by gaining a sense of their inherent value as human beings and by entering into relationships based on unconditional acceptance...The agreement on what a Christian would call the principle of grace is as impressive as it is generally unrecognised’.

What then would happen if we placed grace at the centre of this debate? I want to suggest four hallmarks for us as individuals and churches if we are to be the community of grace and stewards of grace.

First, we must proclaim and live out the gospel of God’s **forgiving grace**. In all our debates we must remember that we all stand together – male and female, gay and straight, married or single, in a partnership or promiscuous – as sinners. We all have to say ‘nothing in my hands I bring, simply to your cross I cling’. And we must

delight and not despair when we see who else stands with us at the cross, wholly dependent on the forgiving grace of God. And we don't just all stand together as sinners. Sin has marred every area of all our lives, including all our sexual lives. We must not forget that we are all, to put it crudely, sexually deviant. So, in all our debates we need to make sure we don't drown out the good news of salvation in Christ because of our defence of orthodox Christian teaching on sexuality.

Secondly, we must display **welcoming grace**. The St Andrew's Day Statement challenges us to give constant encouragement in following Christ not only to those who conform to the callings of marriage and singleness but 'to all who seriously intend discipleship in fellowship with the body of the Church'. The Evangelical Alliance in their excellent report *Faith, Hope & Homosexuality* calls us 'to welcome and accept sexually active homosexual people'. Many evangelical churches in Oxford diocese are now asking themselves how they can do this and why they are not seen as welcoming by people in the gay and lesbian communities. We need to work at this urgently. If we are truly following Jesus then we should be an unashamedly inclusive church which welcomes and shares God's love with all.

Thirdly, we mustn't forget that God's grace is also **transforming grace**. The Evangelical Alliance report talks about welcoming and accepting 'in the expectation that they will come in due course to see the need to change their lifestyle in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox Church teaching'. Here is where what popularly calls itself 'inclusive church' is in danger of forgetting a fundamental gospel truth. God's grace in Christ accepts us wherever we are but never leaves us where we are. Of course we need to beware of defining too dogmatically for others the precise nature or speed of that transformation. We all continue to 'groan inwardly' as we 'await the redemption of our bodies'. We all remain sinners in whom God patiently continues his work. We also need to let God by his Word and his Spirit to convict and transform rather than using our human power. But, as Paul reminds us in that same eighth chapter of Romans, God's great purpose is to conform us to His Son by the gracious transforming power of His Spirit at work in His body the church.

Fourthly, all this means that grace is not cheap grace but **costly grace**. And not just costly for those who experience homosexual desires. It has to be costly for us all. Simply telling other people the sacrifices God expects of them or demanding from a distance that they repent is not the path of costly grace. The path of costly grace - as this congress has often reminded us - is the path that leads to the cross. It is a path of

solidarity and shared suffering. As long as our churches so exalt marriage and the family that they marginalize single people and make those who understand themselves as homosexual feel they need to hide and lie about themselves we are refusing this path of costly grace. Refusing it just as much as someone who abandons a life of abstinence and chastity for a same-sex relationship.

Talk of homosexual relationships leads us into the second word of our title – ‘Licence’. The word is nicely ambiguous. What does licence in the sense of freedom and liberty mean in relation to homosexuality ? When are we facing licence that is disregard of the law or licentiousness ? That unbridled licence is common in the secular homosexual world is clear. But then the same is true in the secular heterosexual world. What is more concerning is that the same applies in much of the gay Christian world. The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement statement of conviction says it is compatible with the Christian faith ‘not only to love another person of the same sex, but also to express that love fully in a personal sexual relationship’. That is purposefully vague because many in LGCM wanted the last word to be plural – ‘sexual relationships’. It is therefore sad but not surprising that Andrew Yip’s study of gay male Christian couples in the 1990s found that 70% did not have sexually exclusive relationships. Even among those who expected their partnership to be sexually exclusive, almost half were not. In fact, unfaithfulness began within six months to two years of the start of their relationship.

Faced with that reality – and we must not collude in hiding it – the church cannot give the impression that it agrees with the world. It cannot suggest that what two consenting adults do in private is not a matter for the church. BUT neither must we pretend that all advocates of change think or live like this. Some gay Christians are not guilty of licence in exactly the same sense. That is not to say that they are right. It is to say that we need to be clear what we are talking about. We must therefore listen and respond to the best examples of those we disagree with - even if they are a small minority. We must, for example, not deny the good qualities in loving, committed same-sex relationships. We can do all that without denying that there are many good reasons why the church cannot and must not commend or affirm such relationships.

Three in particular stand out. First, as we’ve seen, the Bible speaks clearly and with one voice against homosexual practice. The Lambeth Conference overwhelmingly rejected homosexual practice. Why ? Because it is incompatible with

Scripture. Our Anglican tradition is quite clear that the church must not act contrary to God's Word. That is why this issue is ultimately so important to so many of us.

Second, the Bible does this because of the importance of being made in God's image as male and female. The differentiation in creation between men and women. Our being made for each other as men and women. These are vital for a Christian understanding of being human. In Romans 1 we see that to engage in sexual relationships with someone of the same sex is to exchange the truth about God's created order for a lie. It is a failure to do the truth and one of the many signs of our society's disorder and sin. As Professor Oliver O'Donovan writes in the excellent and recently reissued book *The Way Forward?*, Scripture strongly supports the judgment that 'in the sexual act performed between persons of the same sex we confront a manifestation of the fallen and sinful character of our humanity'.

Third, the Bible and Christian tradition present us with two callings – sexually abstinent singleness and the created institution of marriage between one man and one woman. They give no support for some third way of life. That is why those who reject this traditional teaching are incapable of agreeing either on a pattern for same-sex relationships or on why such relationships can be approved. Only in these two callings – marriage and singleness - is a life of chastity and holiness able to be lived.

Disregarding these three principles – in short, approving of homosexual relationships or any other sexual relationships apart from marriage – is therefore a form of licence. It goes beyond the good boundaries God has set for us. That is not easy to say but it needs to be said. The real challenge is how to say it and live it out without losing the priority of grace. The more I've thought about the challenge we face here as evangelical Anglicans the more I think it amounts to this. What will be our spiritual hallmark in the wider church and as we engage in mission in our society? Giving generous grace or seeming to be constantly on the lookout for licence? As we read the gospels we see that question raised within Israel. And it is clear I think which answer Jesus gave. Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.

And so, finally, the homosexuality debate itself. I wonder what you think that debate is about? Part of the problem is we're not even clear on what we mean by 'homosexuality'? We use it often as a noun but really we are dealing with an adjective – homosexual. An adjective that attaches itself to various nouns and so raises various questions. Homosexual desires. Homosexual identity. Homosexual behaviour.

Homosexual relationships. Homosexual unions. Each of those are five quite different areas. For example, none of us in Oxford diocese objected because Jeffrey John describes himself as a homosexual. Our concerns were initially raised because of his teaching. Simplistic questions about ‘are you in favour of gay bishops?’ are therefore useless if we are to have a proper debate.

For most of us here the debate is primarily about behaviour and sexual immorality. But for others it is primarily about identity, acceptance and justice. We cannot simply force our perspective of the issues at stake onto the church. We need instead to seek the mind of Christ for the body of Christ together in this complex and painful area.

We’re also not clear how this undefined debate is to be resolved in England. Its dynamic is therefore quite different from that over women’s ordination. That I think explains so much of the fear, anger, distrust and confusion on all sides at the moment. We must therefore hold onto Rowan Williams’ strong statement when he became Archbishop. He clearly does not wish the Church of England or any other province to overturn or repudiate the Lambeth resolution. That means no legitimising or blessing of same sex unions and no ordaining those involved in such unions. He has bravely backed up his words with his actions in recent months and we need to be grateful to him for that.

More widely, of course, New Westminster and now ECUSA have disregarded that appeal from the Archbishop and the mind of the church stated at Lambeth. In the name of autonomy they have supported licence and in their contempt for mutual accountability shown very little grace. We need to pray for Archbishop Rowan and his fellow primates as, perhaps drawing on the work of *To Mend the Net*, they discern how to respond with godly, loving discipline within the bonds that unite as Anglicans around the world.

That is their hard calling at this time. But we in England cannot therefore ignore this subject. We’ve perhaps tried that for too long. We’ve also allowed the church to say one thing but to do another. There are many questions God is calling us to wrestle with at this time. As we do we need to remember those two key words – grace and licence. And we need to commit ourselves to genuine debate, discussion and dialogue. Among ourselves as evangelicals and with the wider church as we discern what his Word and Spirit are saying to us.

We will need sometimes to stand firm. As we did over the appointment of the Bishop of Reading and must do now in the Anglican Communion. But we also need at all times to listen and to learn. Listen and learn from Scripture but also from people in our church and society who experience homosexual attraction. We cannot pick and choose from that Lambeth resolution. We must listen and learn about their loves and hopes and fears. Only then can we discern how the gospel of grace addresses them and how the community of grace can support and encourage them. Those two stances – standing firm, listening and learning - are hard to hold together. Some of us are better at one than the other. But if the homosexuality debate involves grace and licence we need both. Standing firm against licence. Graciously listening and learning. Only then will we deepen our experience of God's own forgiving, welcoming, transforming and costly grace. Only then will we be able to display that grace to a needy world.