

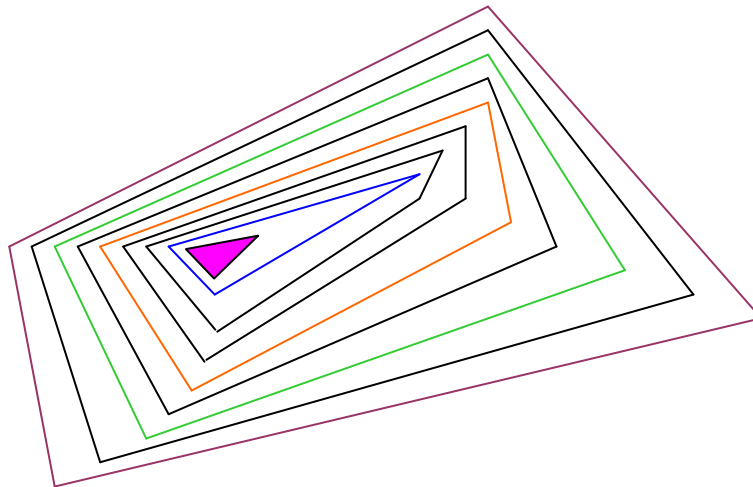
BLESSING SAME GENDER COUPLES: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Blessing Same Gender Couples: Theological Perspectives. Introduction.

The essays and notes in this collection have been prepared to provide theological background to the decision, taken in 2007, by the Anglican Diocese of Niagara to offer the Church's blessing to committed couples of the same gender, most of whom will have been married in a civil ceremony.

The first essay, *A Theological Justification of Blessing Same Gender Relationships*, by Brian Ruttan, argues directly for blessing of committed same gender relationships by integrating common Canadian social experience into the theological foundations provided by scripture, reason and tradition.

Approaching the question, from the opposite direction in a sense, Michael Thompson's essay, *Blessing as Mission*, suggests that by embracing the opportunity to offer blessing of committed same gender unions, we are in a position to serve the community in a new way, broadening and enriching our pastoral mandate.

The question of how The Bible can be understood to support committed same gender relationships, even though it contains seven texts that have been regarded historically to condemn homosexuality outright, is taken up in Margaret Murray's essay *Searching the Scriptures for Wisdom*. Some notes by Marcus Germaine, *What Christian Teaching Tells Us About Freedom to Change Our Minds*, indicate further clues to interpretation of scripture that opens us to new pastoral practice. The Bible is a complex collection of texts drawn from different types of literature. Even when the meaning of a text appears plain, the variety of contextual issues always makes literal reading a mistake.

Peter Wall's essay, *Blessing Committed Same Gender Unions in the Context of the Anglican Communion*, concludes the collection by considering the action of the Diocese of Niagara through the lens of the Anglican understanding of "Church".

The group that worked to produce this collection was convened by Richard Jones and included Stephen Hopkins, Derek Anderson and James Dale, in addition to those whose contributions have already been indicated.

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A Theological Justification of Blessing Same Gender Relationships.

Brian Ruttan

At the end of the 16th century, against the 'Bible alone' (Sola scriptura) position of radical Protestantism, Richard Hooker derived a model of theology from St Thomas Aquinas. It involves attention not only to The Bible, but also to reason and tradition. When Anglicans take on a theological challenge such as developing a rationale for church blessing of committed same gender sexual relationships, this threefold approach is the natural place to start.

In 2007, The Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Niagara took a decision to begin to bless the committed sexual unions of people of the same gender. The Synod made this decision based on common positive experience of people of homosexual orientation. What follows integrates this positive experience into the threefold division of Scripture, reason and tradition.

Let us begin with scripture. The Bible is unanimous in its rejection of same gender relationships of any kind: Genesis 18:26-19:29; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17-18; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:8-11; Jude 7. It is clear that the Old and New Testaments do not envision the social possibility of committed, long term same gender relationships that parallel marriage. It is also true that there is nothing in scripture that is encouraging in any way of such sexual expression. One can easily argue for the inclusion and acceptance of persons with a same gender sexual orientation in the Christian community, but not for the moral acceptability of sexual acts between persons of the same gender. Such acts are regarded in scripture as sin in that they are contrary to the will of God. At the same time The Bible is a great deal more than categorical moral prescriptions. It shows changes and development in theology for instance from the jealous tribal God of early Israel who relies heavily on violence and magic, to the creator and sovereign Lord of the whole earth in the period after the return from the Exile (e.g. Isaiah 40-55). A second example is the development in St Paul's theology from the early emphasis on readiness for the return of Christ (for example 2 Thessalonians) to the later emphasis on God's unconditional acceptance of us through the grace of Jesus Christ in the Letter to the Romans.

Reason, according to classical theology, cannot be at variance with scripture. In the thought of Thomas Aquinas, there is described a natural law that can be discerned in the world by reason. It is possible for human beings to discern God's ordering of nature according to laws which govern God's purposes in ordinary existence. What we cannot discern by reason alone, is revealed to us by scripture. The two together are the foundation of the moral law that governs the personal and social behaviour of Christians. Our sexual behaviour is governed by this moral law and in modern Catholic thought has been described as having "nuptial" meaning: the sexuality of Christian people is given right expression only in marriage between a man and a woman. The vast majority of people have a vocation to be married for the purpose of procreation and nurture of children. The love, friendship and companionship of the married couple is the primary source of this nurture. Some human beings do not have a vocation to marriage because

they have a prior vocation to priesthood or religious life. Men and women whose sexual orientation is toward others of the same gender may also be regarded as not having a vocation to marriage. Given this foundation of understanding, sexual acts between persons of the same gender are regarded as “inherently disordered” because they have no nuptial meaning.

Historic experiences of the church in relationship to scientific method and discovery have challenged theology not just to use reason but to be reasonable. Take as examples the theological struggles in relationship to the 16th century discoveries about cosmology (Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and Newton) and to the 19th century discoveries about the evolution of life (Darwin). Both challenged ideas based on The Bible that had been held as true for centuries. Faced with overwhelming empirical evidence to support the truth of the new scientific claims, theologians sought painful but reasonable adjustments to their estimate of what the biblical creation stories were if they were not true descriptions of life in the universe. Holding to the old teaching would have been unreasonable if not irrational.

Tradition, finally, has the authority of continuing practice. The longer the practice, the more authority it has. One may note, for instance, the appeal in *The Book of Alternative Services*, to ancient tradition in establishing renewed liturgical practices. In many respects its appeal is to renewal and recovery of older traditions rather than novelty. In the matter of blessing same gender sexual relationships, there is little to which we can appeal that is positive. In fact the history is one of violent intolerance towards homosexuals.

The threefold approach of Scripture, reason and tradition by itself yields no support for a move toward ecclesiastical blessing of committed, long term same gender sexual relationships. And yet, we feel a strong desire to move in this direction because of our experience. The stories we tell of people we know and love who are gay and lesbian in committed same gender relationships are filled with personal appreciation and acceptance. They emphasise that, far from being bad people, they are, in our experience, warm and kind, creative, industrious, and compassionate. They are good neighbours, faithful sons and daughters, civic leaders, skilled professionals, good bosses and fine employees. They are committed Christians and valued members of our congregations. The Synod of the Diocese of Niagara has voted twice with a strong majority in favour of full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the church including blessing of their unions (civil marriages). Three other Diocesan Synods have taken the same step and one has moved to an active ministry of same gender blessing. How, then, do we move to integrate experience into our theology of scripture, reason and tradition? This is by no means as simple as it may at first seem. Personal and community experience has not generally counted for much in theology. Theological thinking has most often regarded experience as the agenda for witness in any given historical period. Experience provides the questions that the church addresses and answers using scripture, reason and tradition. Seldom does experience change theological teaching, and yet, that is what we are proposing in the current debate.

The Bible itself gives us a number of examples of the experience of the Christian community resulting in new theological teachings. Good examples of this are the decision in the apostolic church not to require circumcision for its male gentile converts (Romans 2:25-29), and to abandon Jewish dietary laws for Christians (Acts 10:10-35; 1 Corinthians 25ff; Galatians 2:12). Both decisions were taken on the basis of the experience of the old laws presenting unnecessary obstacles to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The price was that the remaining connections with continuing Judaism were lost. In this way The Bible serves as our guide not only through prescriptive statements but also through the record of changes in community life based on the teachings of Jesus. The records of the early church's struggles with the issues of circumcision and what may not be eaten serve as a model for dealing with later issues. As we are guided by the Holy Spirit, we have biblical models for responding to unforeseen social problems and opportunities.

In post-apostolic Christianity, there has been care to distinguish core teaching concerning the essentials of salvation in Jesus Christ, and those teachings that are not essential, the so called "adiaphora". Another way to put this stems from a corollary to the Article of Religion VI (Book of Common Prayer Canada 1959 page 700.) that proposes, "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation ...", but not all things in the Scriptures are necessary for that salvation. One of the key conclusions of *The St Michael Report* on the debate about homosexuality and church teaching, is that biblical proscriptions of homosexual acts are not core teaching necessary to our salvation. In other words, they are among the biblical teachings that may be ignored or contravened should the church, after exhaustive thought and debate, find it necessary or wise to do so, without endangering the salvation of its members.

A good example is the church's decision to ignore and contravene God's unequivocal prohibition of lending money at interest, the practice of usury (Exodus 22, Leviticus 25). The common experience of the development of the economies of European nation states, particularly in the early period of industrialization, led to a change in the perception of money not simply as a means of exchange but also as capital. The economy, from local business to global trade, depends on the availability of money as capital and the most practical way to ensure a supply of money is to pay for its use (usury) through moderate rates of interest. The availability of credit is essential to economic development.

Just as experience led us to regard money differently, so also experience has led us to regard our sexuality differently. The advent of the general availability of chemical birth control in the 1960's initiated profound social changes. While the Roman Catholic Church held to a strict understanding of human sexuality in the context of sacred and natural law, that is where sex acts are essentially for the purpose of procreation, the Anglican Church of Canada, after careful thought and study of this new capacity to prevent conception came to view it positively in the light of new potential for family planning. Family planning allows for greater likelihood that children are wanted in families with the capacity to support and nurture them. It is also viewed as socially positive in reducing the explosion of global population.

Chemical birth control, however, allows for sex acts that are purely for the pleasure of the partners with virtually no possibility of conception. While Mosaic law cannot envision such means, it does forbid male orgasm which is not aimed at conception. This moral tradition is the basis of condemnation of any means of artificial birth control and one that the Anglican communion in general has chosen to ignore.

More recently, the common human experience has been that homosexuality is not in fact socially negative. People of homosexual orientation are no more likely to commit criminal acts than the general population. There is no evidence that homosexual acts between consenting adults are socially harmful. Furthermore, our experience is that people of homosexual orientation have made and do make positive contributions to society in all fields not least in the church. Countless instances of biomedical and psychological research have shown that persons of homosexual orientation are born with this predisposition. They do not choose to be homosexual. It is not, therefore, a form of immorality or perversity which implies wrong choices. In Canadian society, we have come to a position of acceptance of persons of homosexual orientation as they are. This is reflected in the provision by act of Parliament of legal marriage between persons of the same gender.

Our experience is at odds with scripture, reason and tradition and challenges us at the level of the reasonableness of our teaching as a church. Our traditional teachings that condemn homosexuality have become an obstacle to the membership of some in the church and potentially an obstacle to their salvation. We, in the Anglican Diocese of Niagara together with other jurisdictions in the Church, have come to view our traditional teaching as harmful. We aim to be an inclusive church without barriers or obstacles to anyone's redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ.

Therefore, in the apostolic tradition that abandoned the ancient teaching regarding circumcision and diet in order to remove obstacles to the salvation of gentiles, as well as subsequent church decisions in the same spirit such as the acceptance of usury and artificial birth control, we ignore and abandon the church's traditional condemnation of homosexuality. Instead, we embrace as normal and acceptable those who enter same gender sexual unions, celebrating with them the grace of God in their love and offering the church's blessing on their life together.

Blessing as Mission

Michael Thompson

“We bless people not to increase their spiritual dignity but to give thanks for the role they have been called to play within the reign of God and thus to release them to play their part.”¹

A considerable amount of the reflection on the blessing of same-sex relationships has focused on whether such blessings are permissible. Without diminishing any of those reflections, there is another question that cries out to be asked and answered: “Are such blessings necessary?” In particular, are they a necessary response to the mission of God in and for the world?

For Christians who read The Bible, Jesus’ self-understanding in ministry is most commonly characterized in terms of the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. In Mark, the first words of his public ministry are an invitation to turn (“repent”) and inhabit the Kingdom of God. Similarly, in Matthew, using the same words as John before him, he invites his listeners to turn and inhabit the kingdom of heaven. In both cases, he deliberately refers to that kingdom as “near”, as a choice for here and now, and not simply for a distant tomorrow. Parables are often “of the kingdom”, and Jesus himself interprets healing and exorcism as evidence of the inbreaking royal rule of God. At its heart, the ministry of Jesus is a ministry that proclaims and enacts the kingdom of God, and Jesus is himself a living parable of that kingdom. As parable, he overturns common wisdom and assaults current arrangements, in no small part because common wisdom and current arrangements are founded on the decisive power of death. Jesus overturns that power, not by opposing or resisting it with corresponding force, but by incorporating it into himself as the cost of love.

The mission of God is to establish the ethic of the kingdom of God as a living alternative ethic for the present. That ethic emerges first in the Hebrew Scriptures, though the name “kingdom of God” is not always attached to it. It comes in the witness of the prophets to God’s way, and to human practices that honour God’s way – hospitality, conviviality, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, liberation, and healing. Again and again, the story of God’s mission is carried forward by those who are at odds with current arrangements. At Moriah, child sacrifice ends by divine initiative. In Jacob, the practice of primogeniture is overturned by divine initiative. In Egypt, divine initiative reverses the fortunes of Joseph. In Goshen, divine initiative secures freedom from bondage. At Bethlehem, Samuel anoints the youngest son of Jesse, the great-grandson of the Moabite Ruth. God finds a way forward for God’s people, not through the powerful who parade down the main streets of history, but through the backstreets and alleys and by less visible and impressive pilgrims.

This mission, moreover, is not simply a mission to humanity, but one that sets out to catch humanity up into it in service to the creation. The original mandate to “the man” in Genesis 2 is “to till [the earth] and keep it”. A refrain to that founding call sounds in

¹ *Occasional Celebrations*. Anglican Book Centre, 1992

Paul's vision in the Letter to the Romans of creation "wait[ing] eagerly for the revelation of the children of God." From the beginning of the story, humankind occupies a unique role in the divine economy, as creatures in God's image and likeness. Distorted almost from the beginning by something a lot like an ambition for power, the meaning of that humanity is renewed and redeemed in Jesus, and a new call comes to humanity through his disciples to live in the earth as servants.

Though human ambition for power fills the airwaves of history, and continues to dominate human interaction – in households, communities, societies, and nations – its costs continue to be evident in the enormous harm we undertake towards other persons, communities, societies and nations, in the harm we endure in return, and in the harm we bring upon the non-human creation in our hostility, greed and violence. Because of the great power we hold in trust, the whole creation has a stake in our redemption, and is indeed waiting with eager longing, perhaps desperate longing, for human creatures to be known as children of God, instead of as a particularly virulent pathogen inflicting itself on creation.

The Incarnation by which God enters history as a human participant is a disclosure, a revelation, not only of who God is in relationship with human persons, but of who a human person is in relationship with God. When we say that Jesus was without sin, we cannot mean that he was incapable of sin, but that he consistently chose to inhabit the Kingdom of God as a present reality, and to abide in its ethic. He might have chosen to enact "the sin of the world" in his own body; instead he enacted the ethic of the Kingdom of God as a constant alternative to the sin of the world.

With respect to the human creation, Jesus' embrace of that ethic occasioned some practices in his ministry that, though outlandish to many of his contemporaries, bear witness to a consistent and unrelenting commitment to the embrace of the Other. His infamous table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors, his Sabbath carelessness, and his destabilizing parabolic proclamation of God's kingdom as a present choice, along with his claim to a distinctly personal and mutually affectionate relationship with the Holy One of Israel and his sharp criticism of the use of power by religious leaders to discriminate, control and constrain are all elements of the healing and reconciling ethic of the Kingdom of God. That kingdom is a regime of compassion, hospitality and courageous love, in which the torn garment of creation, and especially of the human creation, is mended and whole.

And mended and whole for a purpose, the purpose of serving. A mended, whole humanity can turn from its compulsion to suspect the Other, to compete with the Other for stuff, status, and power, and to approach the Other with lethal intention under the mutually-reinforcing rubric of self-defence. The undefended human on the cross is an icon not only of the divine love for the world, but also of a full and faithful human life abiding in the Kingdom of God and enacting its ethic. As Jesus dies, he embraces even the Others who have conspired to bring it about, and the Others who carry out the execution: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

...

Mostly on Saturdays, but occasionally on other days of the week, they come with their families and friends. Mostly young, but occasionally much older than young, they come and make promises to each other in the presence of God and of community. They come into churches to make their wedding vows, and by those vows and in the power of the Holy Spirit they make “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”, that is, they make a sacrament. It doesn’t matter all that much if they know what they are doing. They aren’t, many of them, all that aware of the holy depth and beauty – or at least they don’t use the church’s language to talk about that holy depth and beauty. Thirty or forty years ago, a wedding was the gateway into the world of adult physical sexual intimacy, so people who wanted to share that intimacy without risking social castigation came to the church and “made it legal”. That isn’t why they come (fewer of them, but they come) now. Having that out of the way, no longer having to believe, or pretend to believe, that the purpose of a marriage is to make sex legitimate, allows us to look deeper into the mystery of what is going on any given Saturday.

And what is going on is that two persons are setting out to build a household that mends what is so often and so easily torn, that knits together two lives with promises of mutual trust and love. It is as if they begin to inhabit a common skin, to share nerve-endings. Their common life is to be marked by mutual care, and by care for any life that is entrusted to them. They “know” each other “with delight and tenderness in acts of love”, in the intimacies of human sexuality spanning a range from a gentle passing touch to the deepest passion. To be sure, not every couple that stands in that place and makes those promises will be able to sustain the practice of a common life. But in the moment of the promises, we catch a glimpse of God, and of humanity redeemed, and the creation bears witness to another moment in which the hope for the revealing of the children of God seems less than completely vain.

Marriage is a sacrament of human communion – physical, spiritual, emotional, social. And because it is no longer possible, in most instances, to reduce its meaning to a kind of sexual gatekeeping function, its witness to human communion in the image and likeness of God can be a basis of hope for the whole creation. When two people knit their lives together for their mutual good and in service of a common purpose, when they renounce hostility, greed, selfishness and indifference as a basis for this relationship, they invoke the possibility that hostility, greed, selfishness and indifference are an inadequate basis for any relationship. The world desperately needs that witness, and waits for it, indeed with eager – desperate – longing. The witness of marriage is a parable of the Kingdom of God.

What does it mean that the church, the community of fellow-servants in the ministry of Jesus, does not allow some of its members to bear witness, in their bodies and in their words, to the reconciling work of Jesus? What does it mean that we interfere with what may well be the work of the Holy Spirit in calling gay and lesbian persons into a pattern of holy living that cradles a hope for the whole creation?

The blessing the church pronounces is, in some sense, an echo of God's blessing; my mother the grammarian would say they are issued in the indicative mood – "God is blessing". Imperative, on the other hand, is God's particular responsibility – "Be blessed". The foundational question is not, "Should the church bless committed, intimate, covenantal same-sex relationships?" but, "Does God bless such relationships?" Is there a pattern of holy living for intimate relationships between two persons of the same sex?

The pattern of holy living for intimate relationships between two persons of different sexes is discernible in the liturgical text that expresses that pattern and proclaims God's blessing on those who conform to it. In particular, the opening address, the betrothal questions, and the prayers suggest the following elements of that pattern. The pattern is intended "for their mutual comfort and help, that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love", and additionally, though not necessarily, "[that they may be blessed in the procreation, care and upbringing of children]." It is a pattern that serves and strengthens relationships, and brings new life into being.

- The pattern is grounded in willing and exclusive mutuality that provides a stable basis for growing in love over the course of a lifetime.
- The pattern is covenantal, rather than contractual. While, in practical terms, such covenants do come to an end by means of a staggering range of human failure and circumstance, the covenant does not foresee its termination, or provide terms upon which the covenant will be abandoned.
- The pattern is eschatological – seeking to enact the messianic future in the present – "May their lives together be a sacrament of your love to this broken world, so that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy overcome despair."
- The pattern is rooted in (will you who witness these vows...?) and responsive to its social context – "May their home be a place of truth, security and love, and their lives an example of concern for others."
- The pattern bears witness – "May those who witness these vows find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed."

God blesses those who undertake to enact this pattern for holy living in a life-long, monogamous covenant. The church discerns and proclaims that blessing for opposite-sex couples, but not for same-sex couples. Given the spiritually desirable effects of living by such a covenant, both for the persons and for the world, it seems incumbent on those who cannot discern God's blessing in the lives of same-sex couples to ask if they do not discern God's blessing because it is not there, or because they cannot see it. And it is incumbent on those who can and do discern such a blessing to proclaim it – for the sake of the persons involved, and for the sake of the community, society, and world, who hunger for trustworthy signs of human communion.

Searching the Scriptures for Wisdom

Searching the Sacred Texts for Wisdom which Speaks to our Questions about the Potential for Grace within Committed Same-Gender Relationships.

Margaret Murray

Introduction:

Scripture appears to be ‘unanimous in its rejection of same gender relationships’.² To be more precise, the words of Scripture are clear in voicing the taboo regarding same gender sexual relationships. Yet, when our theological reflections regarding same-gender relationships are brought alongside the Scriptural witness, new questions emerge. The primary question reveals itself: What is the extent of that apparent unanimity within Scripture? How many voices are represented in shaping that perspective? The Law, the Torah of Israel is clear in naming same-gender sexual behaviour as sinful. Similarly, Paul is clear in expressing the view that those who had rejected God were ‘given over to’ unnatural passions’.

A second question arises: What are the uses of Scripture? J. William Countryman speaks of ‘Anglicanism’s entangled sense of authority’.³ He suggests that Anglicans “rejected the authority of the Pope in Rome in the sixteenth century and we rejected the authority of the ‘paper pope’, The Bible, in the way that the Puritans used it in the seventeenth century.”⁴ Over and over again, as perplexing questions emerge, we examine those questions against a backdrop of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Even when our established understanding of Scripture seems clear and unequivocal, we ask ourselves, “Is the tradition always right?” Such discernment patterns have been observable in the evolution of our thinking about slavery, racism, the status of women, and divorce (to name a few). Currently, we find ourselves re-examining our conventional wisdom regarding the perplexing questions about sexual orientation.

The third question presents itself: Are there other voices provided in Scripture which yield any perspective on the assessment of same-gender sexual relationships? It is true that there are no voices which specifically affirm, bless or even condone same-gender sexual relationships. But, are there voices which imply an ethic which might suggest welcome and acceptance of persons involved in committed same-gender sexual relationships? In other words, can we conduct responsible biblical interpretation which might yield affirmation, blessing and acceptance for committed gay and lesbian couples? In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, people search their sacred texts, in part because they hope to understand how God defines or perceives the role of erotic love.⁵ Aware of the powerful and sensual longings experienced within both spiritual and sexual

² Brian Ruttan: “A Theological Justification of Blessing Same Gender Relationships.” 2008, in this collection, page 2.

³ ‘Anglicanism’s Entangled Sense of Authority’, *A Questioning Authority: The Anglican Witness to the World*. Affirming Catholicism, Third Millenium, London, 2002. Page 4

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Ernst, Carl: "Interpreting the Song of Songs: The Paradox of Spiritual and Sensual Love" 2003, <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/articles/sosintro.htm>

passions, human beings seek ways to understand and live with the tensions which develop. Grounded in Scripture, Judeo-Christian codes of behaviour have developed to regulate sexuality through marriage customs and also through patriarchal assumptions.⁶ Wrestling with this fundamental human dilemma, it is not surprising that searching the Scriptures for wisdom on sexual relationships leads readers into the shifting sands of biblical interpretation. For example, Elaine Pagels notes that Jews and early Christians understood Genesis 1-3 as an affirmation of human freedom to choose good or evil. For many, that freedom would be expressed through the conscious choice of celibacy rather than acquiescing to the customary expectations of society regarding marriage and procreation⁷. Yet, Augustine found in the same texts a story about human bondage to corruption and sin.⁸ Augustine's influence began to shape the way that future generations of Christians viewed human sexuality and human relationships. A similar dialectic exists within the range of biblical interpretations among both Jews and Christians regarding the erotic love poetry expressed in the Song of Songs. The powerfully seductive and evocative poetry in Song of Songs has inspired many, and it has been quoted, suppressed and explained as being simply allegorical.⁹ Despite such tensions, Jewish and Christian readers persist in the task of interpreting Scripture within and for each culture and context, often needing to look beyond the actual words of Scripture to make sense of their questions and their life experience.

With regard to same-gender sexual relationships, the Judeo-Christian Scriptures are clear. Prohibitive texts appear in Leviticus 18:22 and in Romans 1:26, 27. Beyond those texts, where in Scripture would we look for insight regarding human sexuality? Are there other voices which (though not referring specifically to human sexuality) might inform our thinking about the divine-human relationship as it relates to human sexuality? Such a discernment process involves the search for themes and parallels as well as coherence and consistency within those themes. Mining the Scriptures for such wisdom can inform our anthropological and sociological perspectives, effectively grounding the ethical and moral reflections within each era or within each cultural context.

Bernard Brandon Scott – Purpose and Method:

In particular, this study will search the Scriptures for insight and wisdom embodied within the Jesus tradition, focusing on Jesus' parables as a lens through which his teaching might be observed. This investigation will follow the work of Bernard Brandon Scott. In his exploration of the parables, Scott attempts to use the parables to uncover something of the mind and message of the historical Jesus. Scott believes that the parables "testify to the consummate religious genius who had a unique vision of God, a vision he discovered and communicated in parables"¹⁰

⁶ ibid

⁷ Pagels, Elaine, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, Random House, New York, 1988, Page 97.

⁸ ibid

⁹ Carl Ernst.

¹⁰ Scott, Bernard Brandon, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa, California, 2001, Page 1

With disciplined caution, Scott attempts to uncover something of the mind and thought of Jesus. Adopting the scholarly restraint of the Jesus Seminar, Scott examines the parables of Jesus to discover which gospel passages might have their origins in Jesus own teaching. Scott examines each one critically and exegetically. He concludes that twenty-three of Jesus' parables probably existed in the oral tradition prior to the compiling of written gospel accounts¹¹ and that they may represent a glimpse into Jesus' thinking and teaching. Scott acknowledges that the parables cannot help us find out much about Jesus' life. However, he warns against biblical interpretation which oversimplifies the parables, perhaps by assuming that the ancients were simple or primitive people or by assuming that the parables are simple illustrations for common people in their daily lives.

From the discipline of mathematics, Scott borrows the image of 'coordinates' to provide a method for further scrutinizing the parables to uncover the themes and patterns embodied in this layer of the Jesus tradition. 'Coordinates' are developed by identifying two or more numbers which, when taken together, can help to determine the position of a point. In the case of the parables, Scott discovers the coordinates by seeing where the parables intersect with each and with other items from the Jesus tradition.¹² In discovering themes and parallels, he finds that the connected dots begin to reveal an image of Jesus' re-imagined world. Through this investigation, he becomes convinced that the parables express common themes and yield a coherent picture of the re-imagined world that Jesus spoke of – the realm of God, the Kingdom of God. Consequently, Scott suggests that we can get a feel for the parables and that the parables can “give us access to the way Jesus re-imagined the possibility of living, of being in the world”¹³ Following in the footprints Scott provides, this paper will attempt to uncover Jesus' thinking – as it might intersect with the ethical and moral questions emerging in the discussion of the intimate, sexual relationships between committed gay and lesbian persons. By studying the parables, we may be able to hear Jesus' voice as we reflect theologically on the potential for grace within the intimate, sexual relationships between committed gay and lesbian persons.

Scott – Perspectives and Analysis:

Jesus:

Scott describes Jesus as a Galilean Jewish peasant, intending that each word be understood to be critical and significant. Each word provides a distinct lens which helps us grasp something of Jesus life and context. Scott draws upon the scholarly work of archaeologists and anthropologists to inform his analysis¹⁴.

In Jesus' time, Galilee was significantly Greek-speaking and the agrarian economy was shifting. Small farms were being replaced by larger commercialized ventures. Beside the

¹¹ Scott, Page 4

¹² Scott, Page 119

¹³ Scott, Page 6

¹⁴ Scott, Pages 7 - 9

economic strains, the practice of Judaism in Galilee was quite unlike the temple culture of Judaism in Jerusalem and the well-established Judaism in Judea. Within Palestine as a whole, mutual suspicion prevailed among the varied expressions of Judaism. The Temple, itself, would be perceived as a drain upon the economy within the region of Galilee. Nonetheless, Jesus was Jewish and like centuries of his forebears, he became one voice among many, trying to make sense of the traditions of Abraham and Moses within his own setting and culture. As a peasant, Jesus “comes from the bottom of society” and “belongs to what anthropologists refer to as the disposables.”¹⁵ It is against the backdrop of that life experience, that Jesus becomes a storyteller, creating a re-imagined world through parables – a vision of how life ‘ought to be’. In speaking of the kingdom of God, Jesus draws upon a minor theme already embedded in Jewish tradition, translating it into a critique of the culture and reality within his own world. Scott does not see evidence that this was a clear program for Jesus, nor does he see Jesus as a reformer. However, it is understandable and even predictable that Jesus would have come into conflict with other Jews and it is obvious that he came into conflict with the Roman Empire. Scott describes Jesus as “a conflictive personality. A quiet pietistic Jesus will not do.”¹⁶ While the actual reasons for that opposition which resulted in Jesus’ crucifixion are obscured by time and tradition, the interpretation of the parables can offer some clues which suggest reasons why people found Jesus to be dangerous.

Parables:

Our culture tends to be dismissive of storytelling and suspicious of fiction; yet, Scott reminds us of the “power of story to release and empower the imagination”.¹⁷ Within a given society, its prevailing cultural myth functions to image reality in a way that tries to resolve the irreconcilable into a story that makes sense of the conflicts being experienced within that particular culture.¹⁸ Cultural myths and stories carry the normative assumptions within a society. Consciously or unconsciously, the myths provide a backdrop for a particular society’s self-understanding. For example, the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center destroyed the illusion that the United States was invincible.¹⁹ Prior to the collapse of such a deeply rooted cultural myth, any stories, poems and art forms which subvert the prevailing worldview seem offensive and outrageous. Like the story of the Emperor’s clothes, a parable can become a story which functions as an exposé. Through parables, the prevailing cultural myths can be disarmed as people discover that they provide false answers to life’s hard realities. While some stories within a particular culture would create and reinforce the predominant worldview, Scott argues that Jesus’ parables are among the genre of stories that would subvert the status quo because they attack the prevailing myth.

¹⁵ Scott, Page 8

¹⁶ Scott, Page 9

¹⁷ Scott, Page 13

¹⁸ Scott, Page 14

¹⁹ Scott, Page 14

It is important to note that when we read Jesus' parables, we hear them as stories which confirm our predominant Christian perspective. We do not hear them as subversive because they have become our Christian myth. However, Scott reminds 21st century readers that our reactions to Jesus' parables inevitably differ from those of a 1st century audience. For us, the parables of Jesus do not sound offensive or outrageous. They have lost their sting.

However, Jewish listeners would have found it offensive and outrageous to hear Jesus portray the Samaritan as hero. Amy Jill Levine (a Jewish, New Testament scholar) suggests that the 2008 North American equivalent of the story of the good Samaritan might be to cast Osama bin Laden as the hero.²⁰ Similarly, the acceptable and expected metaphor in Israel would uphold the sacredness of that which is 'unleavened'. Jesus' suggestion that the kingdom of God can be compared to leaven would be offensive to most of his audience, not just because of ethnicity but also because of their religious sensibilities.²¹

While the 'appropriate' Jewish response to Jesus' stories would be this anticipated reaction of shock and outrage, the Jewish, Galilean peasants (the 'disposables' in society) might well hear Jesus' sardonically expressing a strong critique of the prevailing worldview – the status quo – a worldview in which they were perceived as being disposable. For them, Jesus' story suggested an alternative worldview. Through his parables, they just might begin to re-imagine their world and their lives. Since they did not belong in the cultural myth of Temple and purity laws, Jesus' attack on that system and his critique of that conventional wisdom would seem like good news. In fact, the message might be life-giving and empowering.

Leaven:

In Scott's analysis, Jesus' use of parables enables him to undercut the presuppositions embedded in conventional wisdom and customs within his world and this fundamental shift is evident in Jesus' teaching about leaven. In the ancient world, leaven would normally function as a metaphor for moral corruption.²² The Gospels portray Jesus speaking about leaven in two ways – one in the Parable in which leaven becomes a sign of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20; Thomas 96:1-2) and the other in relation to the leaven of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:6; Mark 8:15 and Luke 12:1). In the latter, Jesus seems to speak of leaven using the image in its customary 1st century sense, implying that something has gone wrong. For Mark, one recognizes leaven in the Pharisees' request for a sign; for Matthew, it is observable in their teaching and for Luke, it is revealed in their hypocrisy. In each case, the conventional usage of leaven is employed, suggesting that something has gone wrong. However, since the evangelists have incorporated the phrase so differently into their individual editorial and literary

²⁰ Amy Jill Levine, Lecture – April 2008, based on her book: *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2006

²¹ Scott, Page 15

²² Scott, Page 25

contexts, we have no clarity about how or when Jesus might have used the phrase ‘the leaven of the Pharisees’.

In the case of the Parable of the Leaven, the opposite is true. To appreciate the significance of this parable within the Jesus tradition, it needs to be stated that Scott, along with the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar are renowned for their caution in discerning which words in the Gospels most likely transmit the voice of Jesus, without reflecting editorial agendas and decisions of the evangelist. The scholars of the Jesus Seminar unanimously attribute the Parable of the Leaven to Jesus, himself, and have described it as one of the “polestars that guide them to the authentic voice of Jesus.”²³ For the ancients, leaven would normally be associated with contamination or corruption; the image of leaven would not normally be a metaphor for the realm of God! “Just as a decomposing corpse swells up, so does a leavened loaf.”²⁴ Similarly, a decomposing apple becomes ‘one rotten apple’ – a metaphor for corruption. In the Hebrew Bible, unleavened bread is a powerful symbol for the holy. For Passover, the house needs to be cleansed from all leavened bread.

So – Jesus’ appropriation of the theme of leaven to point to the realm of God would be seen as an attack on the conventional myths, the common wisdom.²⁵ Besides causing offence by aligning leaven with that which is holy, everything about Jesus’ parable is offensive. The kingdom of God is revealed in an account about a woman . . . who conceals the leaven . . . within a huge amount of flour (three measures). According to Jesus, God can be identified with the unclean; like leaven, God is hidden within that which society deems to be unclean; from within the unclean, God is engaging in a process of leavening the whole reality – apparently by corrupting it.

Scott reminds us that this perplexing parable can best be understood by considering who would hear this as good news and who would hear it as bad news. In Jesus’ society, the parable would be good news for women and for all who are normally rejected as being unclean; in fact it would be good news for a large majority of the peasants who could not observe the purity code.²⁶ In other words, for the many who are ‘leaven’ in the eyes of the society, the parable assures them that the Empire of God is like them. For those who were doing well, those whose ‘positions’ in society are upheld and affirmed in the prevailing cultural myth, this parable would be bad news. Those who were ‘unleavened’ would prefer not to hear such a parable of Jesus’ re-imagined God. To hear that God would not be found in the unleavened bread – but in the leavened bread would be offensive.

Scott also identifies the eighteen other parables which suggest that God can be found in that which the world counts as unclean. For example, the weed-like mustard seed would not normally be seen to be life-giving for others. Similarly, it is the prayer of the toll-

²³ Funk, Robert W. and Hoover, Roy W. ed. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, Polebridge Press, New York, 1993, Pages 523 & 347 & 195

²⁴ Scott, Page 25

²⁵ Scott, Page 19

²⁶ Scott, Page 34

collector rather than the prayer of the Pharisee which is heard. In other words, “the temple no longer sets the rules”.²⁷ In observing the points of intersection among such parables, Scott proposes one co-ordinate which gives us a picture of the re-imagined world of Jesus. He suggests that eighteen parables of Jesus converge – to express the principle that God is unclean. Jesus re-imagined reality exposes the false assumptions regarding those who are clean or acceptable according to the conventional worldview and proposes an alternative perspective which recognizes the value, dignity and sanctity of those who are generally rejected and thought to be unclean within the prevailing societal norms.

Jesus, the Rebel:

For the purposes of this paper, a short summary of Scott’s other much more detailed arguments will be sufficient as he continues to build his case for the naming of two other insights about Jesus’ re-imagined world.

Eighteen parables intersect revealing his second coordinate: God is present in absence. Scott argues that for Jesus, God is identified not with divine intervention or apocalyptic miracles but with divine absence. Parables like the corrupt judge, the lost sheep, the lost treasure, the lost coin, the rich farmer as well as the Beatitudes reveal realities and experiences in which you cannot point directly to God’s realm; yet, one can perceive it to be present. The activity of God will not reverse the fortunes of rich and poor but it is the poor (not the rich) who can more easily grasp the hidden-ness of the realm of God; it is to the poor that the empire of God belongs.

Twenty eight parables intersect to reveal a third coordinate: Cooperation, not contest. Conspicuous in the parable of the Samaritan, Jesus’ worldview re-imagines human relationships. A few of the other passages which reveal this principle include the accounts of children in God’s domain, the Prodigal, the shrewd manager, true relatives, the vineyard labourers, and losing one’s life to save it. By critiquing the agonistic layering in society, Jesus is commenting on the systemic dysfunction in society which predictably results in hunger and famine. Despite that reality and the hardships endured by so many, Jesus’ re-imagined world of human relationships reveals ways that the truth can be discerned: the children, women, prodigals, Samaritans, day-labourers, and homeless are the ones who can inhabit the realm of God – partly because they have no investment in status. Jesus’ message could be life-giving and empowering because the poor might glimpse the choices they do have – such as choosing to share together what little food they have. In their perspective, they can respond to Jesus message of God’s acceptance of them and live the kingdom’s values, disarming the normal assumptions of society each time they choose cooperation over competition. The poor and disenfranchised see and live each day the consequence of a world built on competition; and within what latent hope they have, these are the people who have the capacity to imagine a world in which cooperation determines relationships rather than competition;

²⁷ Scott, Page 124

they are free to imagine a world where people might share that which is basic to life – family life, food, a shirt or coat.

Some of Jesus' parables appear in two (or even three) of Scott's lists. For example, Jesus' suggestion about who is truly blessed (the Beatitudes - Matthew 5: 1 – 12; Luke 6: 20 – 26) aligns with all three coordinates. The worldview embodied in the three coordinates re-imagines the community's social experience.²⁸ In Jesus' re-imagined worldview, the unclean are accepted as welcomed by God, just as they are. The human community bears responsibility for its own welfare, rather than simply waiting or hoping for divine intervention to set things right. And, when the Samaritan appears as the hero-helper, the ethic of cooperation not competition is revealed.

Scott acknowledges that the parables can only hint at the level of conflict which might have led to Jesus' death, without providing historical clarity. Nevertheless, it is clear that Jesus came into conflict with the establishment and it is also possible to see the ways that his re-imagined worldview may have inspired the disposables in society. Noting the predictable reactions of each audience may explain why Jesus was viewed as a threat by the establishment in his world. Scott's claim is that "Jesus revolts in parable"; we know more about "what Jesus is against that what he is for".²⁹ Scott suggests that Jesus is against the default world. He is opposed to the purity code and the imperial order as models for God - insofar as they are oppressive and destructive of life for the poor, the marginalized and the rejected. According to Scott, the parables create a counter-world, an alternative to the world in which members of his audience are trapped – a world burdened by purity laws segregating the unclean from the clean and into further degrees of shame and degradation. Jesus offers them a "glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances".³⁰

Hearing Jesus' Voice through the Parables:

This discussion began by claiming the need to search the Scriptures for voices that might inform our theological reflection about the rejection or acceptance of gay and lesbian persons within the context of their committed same-gender sexual relationships. In particular, we hoped to engage the Jesus tradition in a way that might yield some insight about the ethical, moral and communal issues emerging in the discussion of the intimate, sexual relationships between committed gay and lesbian persons. We know that Jesus did not comment on same-gender sexual relationships. Yet, Scott's analysis of the parables seems to offer a way we can uncover the wisdom and thinking of Jesus. The parables provide a lens for gaining access to the way that Jesus re-imagined his world and the social structures being experienced.

While we cannot claim to hear Jesus voice, the parable tradition represents a substantial body of the Jesus tradition and Scott's analysis reveals an inner integrity and coherence

²⁸ Scott, Page 133

²⁹ Scott, Page 135

³⁰ Scott, Page 140

within the parables which suggest several insights about the way Jesus viewed his world. It would seem that the parables can provide an adequate hearing aid for our theological reflection.

The three coordinates, taken together suggest that Jesus was opposed to the purity code which segregated people based on their ability/inability to conform to societal and religious customs which did not and could not reflect their daily experience. For example, he seems to have opposed the exclusion and oppression of those who had been judged to be outside a narrow range of acceptability (as interpreted in societal and religious codes) in terms of holiness of life. Instead, Jesus pointed to the experience of the poor, the outcasts and the rejected, highlighting their awareness of the solidarity, connectedness and sacredness in experience, noticeable partly because they are not distracted by material or by blessings which seem commonplace or normative in society. By sharing within community and by looking within the community for glimpses of God's life and presence, those who are not acceptable in society's terms are precisely the ones who can inhabit the realm of God's purpose – not in some future life but in their present experience of being considered unclean, being absent from mainstream society and being aware that competition does not produce a just or sustainable society within the world.

Scott's discussion about leaven is particularly relevant. According to religious tradition and conventional wisdom, that which is unleavened is acceptable. By contrast, leaven is unacceptable and unclean – a sign of corruption. Jesus turns the image inside-out. He argues that God is found in that which society has deemed to be unclean. He suggests that the reality is being transformed by the leavening process which God initiates. According to Scott, Jesus would typically oppose the prevailing cultural myth. His message would be one of subversion, attacking the cultural default. Revealing God's presence in that which society has deemed to be unclean, he would suggest that the reality is being transformed by the leavening process which God is initiating. The good news for those who are outcasts in society is that they do not need to become clean (by society's standards) to be welcomed within the circle of God's grace. Like the poor and hungry, the disenfranchised can perceive and inhabit the realm of God's purpose precisely because they are not distracted by privileges and status accorded by society at large. Closeness in community is not clouded by unconscious (or conscious) codes of competition and the glimpses of God's life and presence are accessible even within the experience of being outcasts in the eyes of the world.

Same-gender couples in committed, intimate relationships had been judged to be outside a narrow range of acceptability as expounded by religious traditions, law, convention and societal taboos. The unanimity of the voices seemed compelling. That predominant perspective used to express our cultural myth; historically, our society understood sexual intimacy within heterosexual relationships to be normative and judged that such relationships can reveal grace and can be blessed. In our Canadian context, we find ourselves on a cusp. Canadian law provides for the marriage of same gender couples. Yet, religious communities still struggle with the implication that same gender marriage might reveal grace and can be blessed.

The blessing of heterosexual relationships affirms the potential for grace within the intimate sexual relationships and in the day-to-day companionship possible for couples mutually committed to one another.

It seems consistent with Jesus' voice embodied in the parables that he might have critiqued the efficacy of that grace and upheld instead the potential for grace within the intimate sexual relationships among same-gender committed couples.

Postscript:

In wondering how applicable the parables might be today, Scott asks 21st century readers, "Can you base your life on the re-imagined world of the parables?"³¹ Scott would say "Yes." His own life story embodies the trajectory of his findings in the parables. Invited to provide four presentations on the Parables of Jesus for a fledgling Christian community – the Community of Hope, Scott has remained within that community for years. The parables seemed to form and express the heart and soul of the community – many of whom have known what it is to be the leaven of society – as gay and lesbian persons. For Scott, being part of the Community of Hope has been a revelation of the empire of God at work – creating safe space for the world's leaven. For Scott, the empire of God which had been a theological idea, became a reality – a lived experience within the life of a community with a capacity for re-imagining the world. Bernard Brandon Scott would say that the themes of Jesus' parables can be lived within the 21st Century.

³¹ Scott, Page 141 ff.

What Christian Teaching Tells Us About Freedom to Change Our Minds.

Marcus Germaine

Brian Ruttan and Michael Thompson have observed that, either by divine initiative or because of our need to come to terms with the times, our theology, our understanding of God and God's infinite mercy and grace, has developed. Peter Wall's paper presents some important features concerning the nature of our church and the way we think about organisation and authority relations. Certainly the way churches organise and arrange authority varies from extremely hierarchical to extremely congregational. Therefore, there must be various underlying hermeneutical principles applied to determining how we ought to conduct our business and governance in light of what we know or believe about the nature of the primitive church.

Brian describes a Pauline church committed to the inclusion of gentiles by not imposing exclusionary laws and customs which would bar non-Jews from full membership in the full 'economy' of God's love. Michael describes the Kingdom of God, "... a regime of compassion, hospitality and courageous love..." "constantly breaking into a fearful, hostile mentality in a way that forces us to interpret the nature of God through the lens of the Kingdom.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), one of the three Cappadocian Fathers, who lived in a particularly patriarchal period, because of his understanding of God as a God of justice, equality and mercy could not abide the misogyny which infested Christian thought and practice in his milieu. When he saw that women were not afforded the same justice as men, because "...The legislators were men and that is why there legislation is anti-female", he interpreted the fifth commandment as legislation that demanded equality between men and women and the "fall" as equally the responsibility of both the man and the woman. In the same oration he argued that the sacrifice of Christ was undertaken for both sexes. He argues, "Did he die for the man? The woman too is saved through his death. He is said to be "from the seed of David' (Rom 1:3); perhaps you think this favours the man. But he is also born of a virgin, and this is a plus for the woman." Gregory's use of his understanding of God's passion for justice, equality and mercy is his hermeneutical key in the face of prevailing cultural norms.

The Anglican theological tradition has always been informed by the theologians of the early church. The argument from Gregory of Nazianzus reflects a logic that affirms Pauline thought wherein St. Paul declares that tensions between men and women, slave and free, Jew and Greek, evaporate before the grace of God expressed in Christ. Perhaps Gregory, should he have been called upon to respond to the issue before us, would have included another tension evaporating before God's grace: gay and straight.

In 1922 the Archbishops of Canterbury and York struck a commission to reflect on and set out Christian Doctrine. The commission's report was published in 1938 and was entitled *Doctrine in the Church of England*. In addressing the Anglican understanding of the authority of scripture, the following controlling considerations were outlined:

- (1)The authority ascribed to the Bible must not be interpreted as prejudging the conclusions of historical, critical and scientific investigation in any field, not excluding that of the Biblical documents themselves.
- (2)Christian thinkers are not necessarily bound to the thought-forms employed by the Biblical writers.
- (3)The Biblical writings display a wide variety of literary type. In using the Biblical books as a standard of authoritative teaching, these facts must be taken into account.
- (4)The supreme spiritual value of some parts of the Bible is not shared by all.

In estimating the relative spiritual value of different portions of the Bible, the standard is the Mind of Christ as unfolded in the experience (my emphasis) of the Church and appropriated by the individual Christian through His Spirit. That is to say, the stages of the Biblical revelation are to be judged in relation to the historical climax. Of course the source of the mind of Christ is the teaching of Christ set out in the Gospels.

Nonetheless the commission reminds us that:

- (1)The actual teaching itself was called forth by particular occasions and was conditioned by the thought-forms and circumstances of the time.
- (2)The record cannot be accepted as always reproducing the ipsissima verba (the actual words) of our Lord.

Clearly there is much unfolding in the experience of the Church that, together with reasonable Biblical enquiry, can be employed to inform our tradition.

David Tracy, in his book *The Analogical Imagination*, published in 1981, outlines important considerations to be made in constructing a theology that derives from tradition. He warns that "...where authority is effectively a matter of obedience to an external norm rather than an acceptance based on a risk and personal recognition of the authority of a living religious tradition...that authority shifts from a truth disclosed to mind and heart to an external norm for the obedient will..." Theology thus becomes the mere repetition of "... shop-worn conclusions of the tradition." In fact, Tracy says that such fundamentalist theology deteriorates into mind and spirit numbing ideology. Aside from asserting that experience is critical to the theological hermeneutical enterprise, Tracy says that fundamentalists fail to understand tradition itself. They fail to recognise that, "The heart of any hermeneutical position is the recognition that all interpretation is a mediation of past and present, a translation carried on within the effective history of a tradition..."

So here we are: finite beings in our historical situation, not denying experience or science, critical enquiry or faithful acceptance of the living tradition borne to us by our forbears, struggling to extend God's grace to the marginalised, as Jesus did.

In summary

Without hermeneutical perspective the meaning and authority of scripture has never been clear. In fact, leaving biblical texts to fossilise resulted in a religious way of life that,

from Jesus' point of view, missed the essence of the law. The disciples on the road to Emmaeus were so entrenched in this ossified understanding of the law and the prophets that they failed to connect their experience of Jesus with their interpretation of scripture.

David Tracy reminds us that the law is not only written on tablets, but in our hearts and minds. Therefore "shop-worn conclusions" regarding how we determine who is within the embrace of God's grace need to be challenged in light of scripture, reason, tradition and the experience recorded and interpreted in our hearts and minds.

Doctrine in the Church of England asks us to consider that the standard with which we evaluate the efficacy of certain portions of Scripture must be "the Mind of Christ", a standard established clearly for us on the road to Emmaeus. Surely even the most rigid conservatives must be implicitly observing this principle when they ignore simony, gluttony, and the directive from the law to have their disobedient children stoned to death. *Doctrine in the Church of England* asserts that the Mind of Christ is unfolded in the experience of the Church. How does such experience condition our understanding of the application of scriptural texts to contemporary circumstances? Wilberforce's response to an accepted practice, not prohibited by the Bible, slavery, arose out of his abhorrence of what he saw of Britain's participation in the slave trade. In other words, his intellectual response was conditioned by his disturbing experience of the degradation of fellow human beings.

Gregory of Nazianzus, living in a culture that accepted misogyny as normative, drew upon his belief that God is infinitely just and merciful in order to challenge what he considered to be misinterpretation of scripture. The notion that Eve caused Adam to sin thereby making her responsible for the fall is accepted by many to this day. The tradition of the church upheld this distortion for most of two thousand years. In fact, one could say that this distortion is foundational to our tradition's acceptance of the subjugation of women. We know that blaming women for the "fallen" condition of humankind has resulted in the brutal victimisation of women in the name of "orthodoxy".

The kind of orthodoxy practiced by Gregory of Nazianzus was subversive. Rather than upholding a tradition that would reinforce exclusivist cultural norms, he challenged those who would deny full human status to all of God's children. Scripture, rather than being understood as a static document full of fixed meaning, became, as Desmond Tutu once described it, an instrument of liberation, properly interpreted.

Blessing Committed Same Gender Unions in the Context of the Anglican Communion.

Peter Wall

Writing in *The Guardian* in January of this year, Church of England and Archbishop of Canterbury watcher Andrew Brown quips: "...there is no reason to believe that most Anglicans, conservative or not, want to belong to a disciplined global organisation".

What an understatement! One could go further and say that there is little or no history to any notion of a global organization either. The nature of Anglicanism as a global enterprise is one of communion - a very distinctive and elusive concept and practice. Anglicans around the world hold to certain truths and traditions which draw them together, but appropriately (and sometimes stoutly) defend the notion of 'independent' or, to use the more politically sensitive and somewhat more cautious term, 'interdependent'. The international Anglican church is composed of some 44 'local' churches and unions, each unique and each reflecting not only diverse history and origins but also widely varying local practices and governance. It is much closer to the truth to say that the world wide church is composed of several hundred dioceses, the basic unit of ecclesial organization in the church. In countries and regions which make up the church, there are national or provincial structures, such as The Church of England, The Anglican Church of Canada, the Episcopal Church of the United States, the Church in Nigeria, the Province of the Southern Cone, etc. Each has a distinct history and formation, the characteristics of which vary greatly. As a simple example, the Church in Canada very closely, in many ways, resembles the Church of England, largely due to the extensive settlement of Canada in the 17th and 18th centuries from the British Isles, although the Canadian church is very definitely not an established church, so has developed in very different ways. Similarly, the heavy influence of immigrants from both Scotland and Ireland - one should take care not to confuse either the Scottish Episcopal Church nor the Church of Ireland with the Church of England! - has also influenced the development of the Canadian church. Similarly, in the United States, the antipathy held towards England in the originating American colonies at the time of the 'unpleasantries' of the 1770's not only influenced the worship of the early American church (the American Book of Common Prayer of 1779 took the Scottish Episcopal Prayer Book as its model) but the startling similarity in the dramatis personae of those crafting the American Constitution and the constituting documents of the Episcopal Church gave rise to a church which is just about as different from the Church of England as one could find. Many Anglican churches in the developing world, or the global south, began as missionary outreach from England and other northern countries. Now those churches have become both national and indigenous, with their own local customs and governance. Any glance at a recent photograph of participants in the Lambeth Conference shows just how much the 'complexion' of the church has changed. Thus any sense of a 'global' church is a difficult one to sustain; indeed, many would say that the real richness of world wide Anglicanism is precisely its lack of magisterial governance, and its great strength is its ability to be a local church with global connections and relationships.

The Character of Anglicanism and Instruments of Unity

Anglicanism has always been characterized by theological diversity and by local or provincial, identities. The Elizabethan Settlement of the late 16th century was a brilliant act of reconciliation between opposing sides of the bitter dispute between Protestants and Catholics which brought together fundamentally different groups while remaining true to the faith and, dare one say, orthodox as well. The Anglican via media, one of our church's greatest strengths, has always sought a middle way, a coalition of sometimes opposing forces gathered together as one church.

So, too, with the matter of a Communion, the world wide expression of Anglicanism has flourished not so much because of what it is as because of what it is not. It is not a magisterium, with a central authority handing down decisions from on high with little or no sense of local autonomy. Nor is it a federation of congregational churches with a basic sense of individual, parochial independence. Rather, the Communion is a dynamic and responsive gathering of provinces, each having and guarding its own independence and governance, all within an agreed upon set of relationships which links these provinces spiritually and into common mission, but which never stamps 'sameness' upon them. Various groups and activities have grown over the years, some of which have now been called Instruments of Unity, which draw the church together, but which do not impose on it any sense of uniformity. The Archbishop of Canterbury is simply a Diocesan Bishop who holds the most historic see of Anglicanism and is, by virtue of office, the Primate of All England. While the most identifiable instrument, Canterbury has no formal authority although does exert an enormous amount of influence. Other instruments of unity, as set out in The Windsor Report, are The Anglican Consultative Council, The Lambeth Conference, and the Primates' Meetings. Each of these, while important and, at times, effective pieces of the unity of the communion, holds no authority over any member church in the communion. The most representative is the Anglican Consultative Council, which meets every three years and at least includes members of the clergy and laity along with Bishops from around the communion. There has been, over the course of the last decade (particularly since Lambeth 1998), a creeping (some would say galloping) trend towards imbuing some of these bodies with an authority never intended. At the heart of Anglicanism is the autonomy of the local church, both in matters of doctrine and of practice. The most basic identifying mark of unity within the communion is the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of the late 19th century. This names four irreducible hallmarks of Anglicanism: the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments being the 'revealed Word of God'; the two principal sacraments, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and the historic episcopate. Nothing which the so-called liberal churches of the west have done in any way repudiates any of these four 'marks'.

Difficult Issues:

While matters of human sexuality have been presented by some as those which will cause the fracture of the communion, we have a long history of handling difficult issues in ways that are distinctive to individual provinces, and an equally long history of respecting each church's right to address these issues on their own. Even as fundamental an issue as the creation of Bishops is handled differently in different provinces. While most now elect Bishops, some provinces, notably The Church of England, continue to appoint them by a variety of processes. The episcopal electoral process, province by province, also varies widely.

If matters of sexual orientation and preference are seen (many would say erroneously) as fundamental issues affecting the faith of the church, surely no less fundamental are matters of marriage and divorce, and matters of ordination. The history of various provinces could not differ more on matters of re-marriage after divorce nor on matters of the ordination of women, both to the priesthood and to the episcopate. Those momentous and difficult decisions over the last three decades by certain provinces of the church, particularly concerning the ordination of women, have also resulted in very painful differences between provinces, but differences within which we have managed to live together. For many years, priests from Canada, the USA, New Zealand, Ireland, and other provinces were not recognized in England. Similarly with Canadian, American, and New Zealand Bishops whose episcopal ministry was not recognized in England for several years. The matter of the remarriage of divorced persons still causes rifts even within provinces, let alone between them, and yet, we continue to be the Church - in unity without uniformity.

Local Culture

While some have argued that the faith of the church can or should transcend local culture and ethics, and that it sits somehow 'above' such earthy considerations, it is clearly impossible to be both separate from culture and faithful to the Gospel. From the polity of local churches through to their prayer life, hymnody, and doctrinal statements, provinces of our church do (many would say should) reflect their own local situations. For example, some provinces of Africa and Asia must co-exist within the compelling realities of indigenous tribal cultures and, at times, the overwhelming influence of other religions (Islam in Nigeria for instance), or the peculiarities of being the established church in England, or the intentional ways in which the Canadian church has adopted aboriginal spirituality and culture. All provinces of our church live within, reflect and, when appropriate, criticize the culture from which they have emerged." An additional note or reference for the Canadian adoption of features of aboriginal culture would be helpful. It is quite clear that, in several provinces in the 'west' or 'north' of the Church, issues of homosexual orientation and commitment are significant parts of the culture and of the church. The process in which the Church of Canada finds itself is consistent with the culture in which it exists. There is nothing in this which we would force on other provinces nor do we expect them to agree. We do ask for sensitive understanding, just as

we would insist that Canadian Anglicans understand, even if they seriously disagree, with culturally specific practice of other churches (polygamy in certain African provinces being an example). In a church which values unity but has a healthy fear of uniformity, surely this is how we must be.