



## EDITORIAL

## We're wallowing in weak argument

Clive Skewes makes an important comment in his review (in this issue) of *Sexuality and Leadership in the Uniting Church*. He says: "(S&L) confirms that the case for ordaining practising homosexuals lacks any sustainable biblical or theological support." Skewes refers to more than the pages of *S&L*. His opinion is based on a host of papers and articles promoting homosexuality as a normal, equivalent expression of sexuality.

Typically, protagonists cite loving relationships, the imperative of compassion and the sanctity of personal rights as ground for change. They invent fantastic interpretations of biblical texts. Traditional positions are evidence of hard-heartedness.

In a recent paper for *For84*, Professor Nigel Watson says Jesus preferred compassion to purity. He derives this conclusion from Marcus Borg's *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*, where 'purity' means emphasis on 'table fellowship, tithing and other purity laws', all of which Jesus criticises. ('Other' purity laws are not listed)

Strange it is that Jesus, who broke social conventions, called his disciples to perfection (Mt.5:48), placed anger on the same level as murder, and lust on the same level as adultery (Mt. 5:22, 28). This doesn't make compassion preferable to social order, or kindness to self-control. Borg and Watson read more into the mind of Jesus than the Gospel writers themselves.

Borg's conclusions don't help resolve the argument. They throw no clear light on the social conscience of Jesus. The answer is not to praise homosexual love as if it, any more than that of husband and wife, bestows the right to ordination.

Our divisions will not be healed by emotive anecdotes or clever tinkering with the Bible, or, as Clive Skewes points out, the theological novelty of sheer romanticism. The times demand more seriousness than that. ■

Divisions and defections:  
The story officials  
shroud in silence

The news which editors of Uniting Church official journals will not tell is the story of massive defections from the Uniting Church, especially since the 1997 Assembly in Perth when the church embraced same gender sexuality as a way of life equally acceptable as heterosexuality.

The church's press has studiously avoided reporting the high rate of loss of individuals, ministers and congregations from our denomination. Instead, their information channels are clogged with good news stories, often of trivial significance and almost always optimistic. The other side of 84 is shrouded in silence.

An experienced researcher currently surveying the church nationwide offers chilling news about the fall-out from the national Assembly's stance on sexuality, particularly since its contentious decision (Resolution 84) to allow people in same-gender relationships to be ordained.

Complete figures are unavailable because new details are arriving almost daily. What is known already is that the Uniting Church is losing members and adherents at an alarming rate.

Current research suggests that 6,500 individuals have left the ranks of Uniting congregations. They include 43 ministers who either resigned or retired because of Resolution 84. To date 110 congregations are known to have experienced the loss of 15 or more members. At least 43 new congregations have been formed, some of which have joined other denominations or para-church groups, or formed their own house groups.

Since not all presbyteries have not yet been contacted there is fear that the number of individuals defecting may exceed 10,000. Defecting congregations vary in size from a group of four who formed a house group in Darwin, to a congregation of 650 in Toowoomba. More than 1000 people have left the Queensland presbytery of Downs. Large numbers have left their Uniting congregations elsewhere in that State.

The silence from official sources is not due to ignorance of the situation. Sydney North presbytery received no answer when it asked the NSW Synod office to release information on defections. This may explain why in every State most Uniting members are unaware that the sexuality issue is causing severe damage.

RA chairman the Rev. Dr. Max Champion said that "unfortunately the Uniting Church national leaders do not seem too concerned. If there were such unrest in a multinational corporation or a political party they would be the first to demand

explanations and reform. The fact that they have not done so in the present crisis within the church ranks is hypocritical and self-serving."

Deputy chair of RA Mrs. Mary Hawkes said RA believed the significant decline in numbers since Resolution 84 had further weakened the church. "The Uniting Church is rapidly losing many of its dynamic leaders and parishioners, including many young families, from both rural and urban congregations.

"It is deeply saddening to have lost so many people over an issue the national Assembly deemed was not vital to the life of our denomination. This is at best farcical and at worst devastating to an already declining church community. This is particularly concerning when you consider that the Uniting Church is the fastest declining of all major denominations, according to the most recent National Church Life Survey."

A 2004 study by the RA showed that of 27,000 attendees surveyed the vast majority agreed that celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage was a requirement for exercising leadership in the church. The RA currently has 180 member congregations throughout Australia.

The seriousness of the rift between Assembly and Synod officials and rank and file members mirrors events elsewhere in the developed world.

An accurate report of the Uniting Church situation is expected to be ready for publication by late April.

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## GENERAL SECRETARY REPLIES TO THE REFORMING ALLIANCE

### Regulations prevent re-opening of R84

Assembly general secretary the Rev. Terence Corkin has replied to ten questions from the Reforming Alliance aimed at preventing schism in the church. The RA last year asked the Assembly standing committee to take action in response to church-wide disquiet aroused by Resolution 84.

In a letter to RA chairman Dr. Max Champion, the secretary defends the standing committee's record in responding to calls from two State synods and several presbyteries, as well as the Reforming Alliance. The committee, says Mr. Corkin, has listened to complaints from the church and followed the church's Constitution.

His detailed reply covers each point in the RA submission, but gives no indication that the committee's attitude will change.

Referring to RA's request to re-open the homosexuality question because it is a 'matter of vital importance to the church' (a move rejected by the

last Assembly), Mr. Corkin rightly states that the standing committee cannot undo a decision which the Assembly declared to be not of vital importance.

Nor does he accept that the committee has failed to 'listen' to the church or to the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and ethnic congregations. He rightly points out that the committee has had many conversations with these groups, in which it encouraged each to follow its own path but to remain within the Uniting fellowship.

In Mr. Corkin's words: "Discussions ... held since July 2003 ... have given no cause for us to believe that we cannot come up with a mechanism that will enable (the Congress) to remain within the broad life of the UCA". He makes the same point with regard to RA and other groups opposed to Resolution 84.

"The standing committee has consistently affirmed the importance for the health and life of the UCA that the whole range of theological perspectives be available within the (church) ... There is ample scope for all voices to be heard and to operate within the (church's) councils. It is of grave concern if any members ... are getting the message that they are not welcome ... because they are evangelical, etc.

"I would be willing to work with the officers of RA ... to assist them to help us find the ways in which it is possible for people who have significant differences in matters of conscience that are not of the substance of the faith to remain together in the one church."

Mr. Corkin's hopes for co-existence, and his view that sexuality does not belong to 'the substance of the faith', touch on another of RA's questions, namely, the rights of conscientious objectors who feel compelled to withdraw from the church. He falls back on the Basis of Union (which "it is impossible to revise"), the Constitution and Regulations to show why the Assembly offers no suggestions.

"It remains open to the RA to give further thought to what they would hope to achieve through such provisions (of rights) and what they might look like."

The Assembly, according to Mr. Corkin, has not formally sought the views of other churches on Resolution 84, but he finds nothing in ecumenical discussions to suggest that those churches believe "that our actions have put us outside the one holy, catholic and apostolic church."

To the criticism that Sexuality and Leadership (an official study book of the Assembly, reviewed in this issue) contained no reference to persons who 'have come out of a homosexual lifestyle', Mr. Corkin says "it was not possible to include every aspect of the discussion in the book." But as a result of strong representation from church members the Assembly had agreed to include material by Sy Rogers about 'redeemed sexuality' on the Assembly's web site. "I believe this meets the concern raised by this question."

Dr. Champion said Mr. Corkin's reply contained no surprises. The letter showed the standing committee to have acted properly according to the church's rules and regulations, and that it wants to retain every group within the church by a process of discussion and constant deferral of decisions.

"We wonder whether such a church is redeemable, especially when mutually exclusive beliefs are regarded as equally correct. Is it sufficient in a debate that is causing huge losses to the church and heartbreak to members to simply allow the question of truth to be set aside?" he said.

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## GOSPEL, CHURCH AND SEXUALITY

# Pitfalls of pluralism amid doctrinal uncertainty

D. L. Jones

*Continuing a paper presented to the 2004 RA Conference on problems facing the Uniting Church in its current approval of doctrinal diversity.*

In approaching the question 'what is Scripture' there are at least two answers: namely, that held by individual members of the UCA and that held by the UCA in its official documents (e.g. Basis of Union and the reports and resolutions of the Assembly).

In 2000 the Assembly reaffirmed "the centrality of reading and studying the Bible for the enhancement of every aspect of the life of the Uniting Church". In a Task Group report to the 9th Assembly, reference was made to seven broad perspectives on biblical authority held within the British Methodist Church which, the report suggested, "does give a sense of the breadth of views found within a church like ours." These seven perspectives indicate the range of opinions held by individual members in the UCA.

The seven perspectives identified were:

- The Bible is the Word of God and is therefore inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour.
- The Bible's teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy. It cannot be expected however, to provide entirely accurate scientific or historical information since this is not its purpose.
- The Bible is the essential foundation on which Christian faith and life are built. However, its teachings were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts, and must therefore be read in that light.
- The Bible's teaching, while foundational and authoritative for Christians, needs to be interpreted by the Church. In practice it is the interpretation and

guidance offered by church leaders and preachers which provides authoritative teaching.

- The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God's Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance.
- The Bible witnesses to God's revelation of himself through history and supremely through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is not itself that revelation, but only the witness to it.
- The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents, which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places. The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ.

Having acknowledged this breadth of individuals' perspectives on the Bible, the Task Group report (Section 4.2.6) goes on to state the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God:

"To what or whom do we refer when we speak of "word of God" or "Word of God?" The Basis of Union is very clear (para 4) that "Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives new life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist." The Bible is described in the Basis (para. 5) as "unique prophetic and apostolic testimony." This in no way diminishes the significance of the Bible, for the church's preaching of Jesus Christ is "controlled by the Biblical witnesses" (para 4). Jesus Christ is the Word of God but we have no access to Him without the witness of scripture. It has been the custom of the Church to refer to the Bible as word of God. Jesus as Word of God and Bible as word of God are inextricably bound together.

The report went on to note (Section 4.2.7): "Though we might hope that differing ways of interpreting the Bible within the church might be energising and helpful, the opposite is often true. Debates about biblical interpretation are often divisive and inconclusive. It is time for the church to move on beyond the present impasse towards fresh ways of valuing, using and interpreting the Bible. While scholars have a role to play in this process such a breakthrough must grow organically over many years from within the life of the church reclaiming and befriending the Scriptures as a life-giving, transformative and faith building gift of God to the Church."

Paradoxically, at the same Assembly, a Statement on Unity and Diversity, arising out of ongoing consultations on the issue of sexuality, was adopted and commended to all Synods, Presbyteries and Congregations. In that statement, the following affirmation was made:

We affirm: The authority of the Scriptures as defined in the Basis of Union, acknowledging that within the church there is a range of views on questions of Biblical interpretation on various matters of Christian faith and practice.

This debate over the interpretation of Scripture will go on and on and will, I suggest, be inconclusive, at least in the short term. This is because there is a growing diversity of interpretive methodologies and only recently has there begun to emerge an attempt to engage the question of how hermeneutical pluralism is to be disciplined in the Christian Church (particularly the Protestant branch of the church).

Susan Gillingham (*One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies*, Eerdmans: 1998, 231) comments helpfully:

“Towards the end of his six-hundred-page work on biblical hermeneutics, Anthony Thiselton’s last pages focus entirely on the issue of what he calls ‘hermeneutical pluralism’. By this, Thiselton means the tension between the need for openness to each and every mode of interpreting the biblical text, and at the same time the need to exercise some discretion over this openness, lest pluralism itself becomes another ideology. The irony in a pluralistic approach is that it too can become a dogma...

“An appeal to read the Bible in a pluralistic way is thus in need of some sort of self-critique. Thiselton, as a Christian theologian, proposes that this could be achieved by the new horizons which are found in the cross and resurrection: the cross, because it reverses all our expectations about what is effective, and challenges our very concept of power and understanding, and even alienates us from all we may believe about ‘wisdom, religion and power politics of...society’; and the resurrection, because it offers us a world-view which cannot be evaluated by any systematic predetermined way of thinking about the Bible as Scripture and an open-ended, liberal, pluralistic way of thinking about biblical texts. The ultra-orthodox and ultra-liberal approaches to the Bible are equally extreme, and the truth may well lie somewhere between the two.”

I quote Gillingham’s work simply to indicate that, in the midst of the methodological pluralism for the interpretation of Scripture in the current debate, there has to be a recognition that pluralism needs to be “disciplined” by the gospel. By advocating ‘discipline’ I am not, however, advocating ‘control’, which would be dangerous and ultimately destructive. Nevertheless, biblical interpretation must be in the service of the gospel. In recent years, there has begun to emerge an awareness that biblical interpretation done in isolation from systematic theology (and vice versa) does not necessarily serve the gospel nor the church.

### ***Redefining diversity***

Recent experience has shown just how divisive (and inconclusive) the debate about biblical interpretation vis-a-vis homosexuality can be. In the midst of this debate the UCA affirmed, as stated earlier, “that the church’s work and unity are built upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ” and that “we are bound together by Christ”, while acknowledging “our diversity as servants of the living God.”

I contend that the Ninth (2000) and Tenth Assemblies (2003) have begun to redefine the under-

standing of diversity in the UCA. The Basis of Union does speak of diversity in the church. However, it does so in a particular way, namely with reference to the gifts of its members which are to be used for the building up of the whole (Para. 3). This diversity of gifts is acknowledged with thanksgiving because “the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ’s Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service” because “all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ” (Para. 13). That is, the Basis of Union uses ‘diversity’ in relation to charismata or gifts.

However, the Ninth Assembly’s “Statement on Unity and Diversity” used diversity with reference to a number of matters. It noted that there is a diversity of viewpoints on ‘committed same sex relationships and ordination’, while also acknowledging ‘the diverse gifts of all church members’. It also acknowledged, as noted above, a diversity (although the word ‘range’ was actually used) “of views on questions of Biblical interpretation on various matters of Christian faith and practice.”

The question needs to be asked whether the Ninth Assembly, in this very process of acknowledging and giving status to a modified understanding of diversity, together with the naming of the seven broad perspectives towards the Bible, laid the platform (or simply acknowledged its existence) for the UCA to become the firstly truly post-modern church in Australia.

### ***Our confessional heritage***

How does the UCA embrace both its confessional (Presbyterianism and Congregationalism) and evangelical (Methodist) heritage? Although the nuanced wording of the Basis of Union indicates that its framers did not want the UCA to go down the path of something like the Scots or Westminster Confessions of faith, the Basis of Union could still be described as a ‘minimalist confessional document’.

The Basis of Union contains some key statements about Christology, church, scripture, soteriology, and sacraments. However, it is ‘confessional’ in a different sense from The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and it can hardly be compared to the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Savoy Declaration (1658). The status and role of the Basis in the life of the UCA have been the subjects of ongoing and unresolved debates in the church. Do we know what ‘guided by the Basis of Union’ means?

### ***Liberal theology’s legacy***

One issue facing the UCA is how three to four decades of liberal theological influence is to be reconciled with an orthodox Trinitarian theology. Although there are pitfalls in claiming to be orthodox, there is a groundswell of support for those

doctrines that were hammered out in the ecumenical councils of the church and which are summarised in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. This groundswell is described by Thomas Oden (*The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*) and others as a return to "orthodoxy". How are such different theological approaches or emphases to be accommodated in the UCA (or any church for that matter) if the church is to faithfully pass on the apostolic tradition? These differences come into sharp focus in the debates within the councils of the church where presuppositions, theological convictions, personal experiences, and ethical frameworks swirl in dynamic (and sometimes destructive) tension around such issues as human sexuality and how it is expressed.

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*Next : How to reaffirm the church's central doctrines.*

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## INTERPRETING THE BIBLE FOR TODAY

# Who of us corrects Scripture correctly?

Brian Hill

*Continuing Dr. Brian Hill's paper given at the RA Conference in July 2004.*

**L**etteralism and Literalism are two ways of interpreting the Bible. Evangelical scholar Ernest Kevan drew a distinction in the 1950s between these ways. He said that two people may say they believe the Bible literally. For the Letteralist this means to regard every word, taken at face value in a preferred translation, as equally inspired by God. Bill Loader is not the only one who has argued that this principle cannot be acted upon to the letter, for different parts of Scripture say contrary things.

This is true. Nobody can act on every injunction literally. Everyone is selective, according to some method of evaluating passages which is, in the end, our hermeneutical theory. Some acutely clever satires on the letteralist position are running round the internet, as in the case of the tongue-in-cheek correspondent who wrote to an Orthodox Jewish broadcaster in America:

When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle . . . I simply remind them that Leviticus 18: 22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. [However] I do need some advice from you . . . on [another matter]. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21: 7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her? Touché!

The Letteralist cannot condemn homosexual practice on the one hand, and at the same time ignore verses that literally condone slavery. That is inconsistent. (This argument has in fact been used by some liber-

als against opponents of same-gender sex).

Letteralism will not work. But, a truly *literal* interpretation, according to Ernest Kevan, takes into account the historical and literary context of each passage. The literal meaning of a passage is the meaning it had for people in the period in which it was written. After clarifying that, we must then ask if it contains an enduring principle or a local ruling for that situation. What is our interpretive method? Why position this passage and not that one at the centre of the salvation story?

## *Post-liberalism*

Letteralism is one extreme. The other extreme I call "post-liberalism." It leans heavily on post-modernist assumptions, one feature of which is its insistence that each person constructs a view of reality in his/her own mind from the many clues obtained from cultural conditioning and personal experience. In the end, we cannot be said to know that any of these internal constructs is true, that is, that they correspond to the way things really are. "What's true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is true for me. Let's just live and let live." This attitude underlies much of the current rhetorical use of the term 'inclusiveness.'

In this mood, some theologians argue that the interpretation of Scripture is always subjective, and it would be arrogant and unchristian to insist that a fellow believer accept our interpretation of a passage. Much less should we limit their access to a teaching role in a Christian assembly.

Well, of course it is true that we all bring something of our own subjectivity to the text. But post-liberalism fails to acknowledge that the Scriptures themselves yield hermeneutical principles which help us correct our personal bias.

## *Scripture and culture*

A theory of biblical interpretation inevitably underlies our use of the Bible. We all approach the text with one, whether we realise it or not.

Some evangelical friends will feel that I am making the easy difficult, and driving a wedge between the believer and the clear statement of Scripture. Actually I would be the first to applaud Tyndale's desire to put a Bible in the hands of every plough-boy, instead of leaving it locked away in the hands of scholars. I am also delighted, now and then, to meet people who, without any intervention from missionary-minded Christians, have somehow obtained a Bible, or even a portion of one, and have been led to Christ by what they read. It is not the usual way, nor is it rare.

But if they, and we, are to grow in our Christian walk, we need to become more self-aware of the way we use the Bible in our lives. Later I will suggest some biblically endorsed guidelines. But I would first like to give one more demonstration of the need for a hermeneutic, an approach to interpretation.

Post-liberals like to argue that the hermeneutical problems posed by references in the Bible to slavery, the subordination of women, and same-gender sex are all of a piece. Since we have outlawed slavery and liberated women, we have shown our willingness to amend the Scriptures. So why not revisit same-gender sex?

The letteralist has no answer, except perhaps to say, on the basis of a biased selection of texts, "Ban them all: slavery, equal roles for women, same-gender sex." Indeed, this is what some Christians are saying. But they cannot claim undisputed Scriptural grounds for this simplistic reaction.

### *Contested interpretations*

*Slavery* is never directly condemned; it is accepted as a social fact, within the Bible and among southern US evangelicals in the 19th century. But see Galatians 3:28, Onesimus, Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1. Also, US and UK evangelicals were abolitionists and evangelicals today condemn it on theological grounds.

*Subordination of women* is accepted as social fact, but in the Old Testament many rights were protected and women were praised. Note Jesus's dealings with women, Galatians 3:28 and Paul's greetings (e.g. Romans 16). This attitude was accepted into the 20th century, but evangelical women formed the earliest reform movement, the WCTU. In the Salvation Army men and women officers had parity. Most denominations and some evangelicals endorse role subordination, but the UCA and most of its evangelicals affirm equal roles for women. Few Christians oppose the UN Declaration's affirmation of equal civil rights of women.

*Engagement in same-gender sex* is explicitly disapproved in the Bible, alongside the general teaching of sexual faithfulness. See also Jesus's 'laws' of love and his prescription of the route to forgiveness through repentance. Same-gender sex is prohibited in most cultures. Christian disapproval is consistent and generally judgmental. Same-gender sex is promoted in the open society. Most Christians say it is morally wrong; some liberals allow it.

Judgmentalism is now moderated by respect and compassion. Most Christians endorse appropriate civil rights for homosexuals, regardless of private sex acts. A homophobic minority deny them equal civil rights.

### *Interpretations and attitudes*

1. Note the biblical perspectives summarised above. Virtually nobody in either Old or New Testament times questioned slavery or the subordination of women. The existing state of affairs was taken as given at that time. By contrast, same-gender sex is specifically mentioned, and condemned, in both Testaments.

2. Slavery was almost universally treated as part of the created order until the 19th century. Biblical

scholars, including US evangelical Charles Hodge, thought it had biblical justification. Yet evangelicals were among the greatest abolitionists (Wilberforce). Today slavery is ostracised in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The world has christianised cultures to thank for that.

3. The subordination of women was rarely challenged by the church. The principle of equal rights for women emerged only in the last century, first of all in christianised cultures. Even now, many Christians (high church Anglicans, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and evangelicals) defend the hypocrisy of women's subordination while proclaiming them equal before God.

4. In regard to same-gender sex, history shows that this practice has been continually frowned on in most cultures. But the sexual revolution in the 1960s popularised, in the West, many permissive sexual practices including this one. More recently, a sustained international gay lobby has obtained a firm footing in the secular media, persuading even many Christians, mainly of post-liberal persuasion, that there's nothing wrong with same-gender sex, at least between homosexually disposed people.

5. Along with verses often quoted to justify the suppression of slaves and women, there has been a second strand of biblical evidence foreshadowing their liberation. The great charter of liberation is Galatians 3: 28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek ..." The seeds had been sown, though they took nineteen centuries to break through.

6. Where biblical data refer to same-gender sex they condemn it. In this case there is no hint of a future relaxation of this attitude. Instead, on a positive note, core passages set out a high sexual ethic that is a total and joyous alternative to immoral forms of sex.

I mention these issues to show that not only has the Christian world in general shifted ground over the last two centuries on these matters, but evangelicals in particular, who claim to justify their positions from Scripture, have shifted ground too.

Does this then confirm what post-liberal critics say, that you can prove anything from the Bible, and that evangelicals are no better off than anyone else in trying to render the biblical data consistent? Certainly two points must be conceded: one, appeals to proof-texts alone are a two-edged sword that can be turned against us; and second, we need to be more aware of our own hermeneutic. Also, we must be able to show that our approach has Scriptural support, and is not one subjective option among many.

When all's said and done, when we give the clear testimony of Scripture its full weight, we find a consistent core message that is radically counter-cultural in its understanding of God and the holy life. We come back to the Bible to be corrected by it.

There is a great difference of course between letting it correct us, and us presuming to correct it! Post-liberals do the latter when they treat the Bible as

culturally bound, which privileges their own cultural conditioning. Yet no greater chameleon has been seen than 20th century claims about 'the assured results of higher criticism'. The Basis of Union supports our view. The church needs to appeal constantly to Scripture. We are all potentially culture-bound in our reading.

And we must be prepared to look again at the interpretations which support our views when they are disputed by other Bible-believing Christians. It is not we who are infallible. It should be quite clear by now that we can sometimes get it wrong and be captive to our cultural conditioning. Remember the evangelical slave owners in the American south.

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*Next : Guidelines for interpretation.  
Seven suggestions and a postscript.*

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## BOOK REVIEW

# A hasty collation with sheer romanticism

*Sexuality and Leadership in The Uniting Church,*  
*reviewed by Clive Skewes*

The confusing layout of *Sexuality and Leadership (S&L)* suggests a very hasty collation. *S&L* comprises 'Issue Papers', 'Resource Papers' and 'Statements', each numbered as Paper 1, 2, 3 etc. It is unclear what distinguishes each kind of document, so that when discussion groups compare papers they are likely to be confused as to which section they belong. How is a Resource Paper distinct from Statements, when the whole book is described as 'reflection resources'.

For the sake of clarity I refer to page numbers and authorship. Readers are advised to read *page 76* on the use of this booklet. This could prepare them for the frustration of protracted discussions with no planned outcome. *Page 76* informs us that presbyteries, synods or the Assembly need not make any decision arising out of responses from study of this booklet in any council of the church.

This news can only feed the suspicions of those who think books on this subject are designed to stifle dissent and insure no action is taken against the group-think harmony of the UCA's leadership. Indeed as Bruce Gully (*Travelling Emu*, Spring 2004) points out, because congregations are not required to use this book or respond to it, and because it has no bearing on any foreshadowed Assembly decision, it cannot provide the Assembly with any proper indicator of the church's thinking.

Questions accompanying each paper reinforce these impressions. The same questions are applied to each

document; they do not arise out of them. Only the artificial contrivance of inserting a few different words links questions to specific chapters. No help is given in weighing and comparing arguments. If readers follow the process advocated in *S&L* the church will be locked in its present state of self-denial for a very long time.

Although voices on both sides of the debate are heard, the misleading impression that Uniting people are evenly divided on this issue is not corrected. We are left to infer that this is simply another issue which reflects our diversity.

Well, does *S&L* have any positive value? Yes, it is useful for informing members of the different views held on this issue and why people take the positions they do.

It also confirms that the case for ordaining practising homosexuals lacks any sustainable biblical or theological support.

Professor Nigel Watson (*pp.40ff*) makes a lone effort to provide such support, and the paper from Uniting Network is replete with biblical references to grace (though not to homosexuality) (*pp.57ff*). However when biblical references are not explained in non-biblical language they can be used to smuggle in all kinds of strange ideas.

Professor Watson says he is persuaded by the deep physical love of self-affirming gay and lesbian Christians. The same could be (and has been) claimed for people in adulterous relationships.

Watson rests his case on three arguments: First, on what the Bible does not say about sexual identity, and what, he presumes, the Biblical writers do not know. These are arguments from silence and such arguments can prove almost anything except perhaps that circles are square.

Watson gives great significance to the fact that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. Jesus did not speak directly about many issues, such as slavery and usury. Does his silence condone those activities too? The weakness of appealing to Jesus over against Paul is the assumption that the Gospels were written before the epistles and thus have primary authority. In fact New Testament scholarship is united in claiming the epistles were written before the Gospels and that the faith held at the time the Gospels came to be written was based on the testimony of the epistles, including those ascribed to Paul. In that case, we would expect that if Paul had distorted the Christian message there would be corrections to his teachings in the Gospels. No such corrections are to be found.

Watson's paper ignores the fact that Scripture's prohibitions focus on behaviours because they are contrary to God's purposes in creating man and woman. It is also unclear whether we should speak of a sexual identity (*This is the way I am*) or a sexual construct (*This is who I presently choose to be*), given the strong emphasis on constantly shifting choices among many in the homosexual community.

Second, Professor Watson appeals to the experience of self-affirming gay and lesbian Christians, without any reference to Christians converted from this lifestyle. Nor does he consider tribal and scriptural law among members of the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, which are vividly described on p.51 by Congress members.

Third, Watson appeals to justice. His approach is futile because he does not locate justice in the context of God's enduring purposes in creation and redemption (the re-creation). As Dr. Max Champion points out (pp.34ff) 'the complementary design of our bodies and our call to shape sexual relations according to God's will in Christ means that homosexual practice cannot be considered as normative in the life of the church .... We are not 'individuals' who have the right to meet our needs as we see fit, but ... persons who exist in the bodily difference of male and female and who may be called into the joyous union of husband and wife in accordance with God's good will.' There are no individual rights apart from what God has purposed in creation and redemption.

Champion's paper is strongly anchored in theology and Scripture, and, as he points out, without agreement on these foundations, fragmentation will follow. Yet beginning from such a basis does not preclude robust debate. It is instructive to read his paper and compare it with the claims in the *Introduction to Section 1* (p. 14), which state that the conflict over ordaining practising homosexuals reflects an inbuilt tension in Scripture and the Basis of Union between openness and tradition.

Champion's paper makes clear that there is no inbuilt tension in Scripture or our tradition over this issue. One can only conclude that the real tension is between some in the Uniting Church and Scripture. Indeed, reading their public statements one suspects that many in our church have already broken with Scripture, the creeds, the confessions and the ecumenical church by the way they wish to deal with this issue.

Uniting Network's paper (pp.57) indicates a broader agenda than homosexual ordinations. Inclusion in ministry and leadership roles is extended to bi-sexual and trans-gender people as well. Hence the article makes frequent use of the acronym *LGBT* people (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender people). The Network's claims about the universal grace of God and its desire to reach all kinds of people is commendable. But the grace of which Scripture speaks excludes antinomian laxity (*the claim that because of the centrality of faith there is no need to obey any moral law*), for forgiveness is an act of judgment which expresses God's 'no' to sin. God is 'just to forgive'. In the Cross Christ both identifies with sinful humanity and confesses God's holiness. Thus God condemns sin and frees us sinners: God's righteousness is judicial and gracious at the same time in the one act of salvation in Christ.

In Romans 6 Paul demonstrates that the totalitarian rule of grace is deeply opposed in all respects to the totalitarian reign of sin. In so far as we are under the reign of grace, sin is deprived of its power and supremacy over us.

The Network article speaks of the gifts of *LGBT* people but seems unaware that our baptismal liturgy speaks of the gift (made over to people of all kinds of orientations and practices) signified in Baptism: that of dying with Christ, being planted in the death of Christ. In dying with Christ, Paul tells the Romans, '*we died to sin*'. To speak of universal unconditional grace without taking into account that it is also given us to die (to sin) with Christ is life-denying. For is not the purpose of dying with Christ that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (*Romans 6:4*)?

A great weakness of the book is that while the experiences of gay and lesbian people are held up to us nothing is heard from Christians who have left the homosexual lifestyle. Where is there a paper from anyone representing this group? Several of them courageously shared their testimony at the last Assembly but, apart from invitations by a few congregations, their voice has been consistently ignored.

It is misleading to set down the Uniting Church's commitment to Christian unity (p.26) without acknowledging that on this issue, which is affecting denominations world-wide, the UCA has declined to consult its partner churches.

It is deliberately misleading to claim that '*The views of other churches are often taken into account when the Church is seeking to reach a decision on an important matter, for example in the discussions on baptism ... and in the discussion on sexuality in 1990's and 2000's*'. The only appropriate rejoinder to this claim is 'Paper reference numbers and dates please!'

In fact the above claim of *S&L* contains a double irony in the light of the 2004 Victorian Synod's rejection of a motion, by a 95 per cent majority, asking the Assembly to do what this paragraph claims to do. A more honest approach would have been to admit that on this issue the ecumenical dimension in the UCA's life has long gone the way of its commitment to Scripture and rigorous theological thinking and thorough research.

Finally, the booklet introduces a theological novelty. In the prayer for use when an impasse is reached (p.5) we learn '*the seeds of abundant life*' are located '*in the strength of our convictions and the passion of our feelings*'. This is sheer romanticism. And when romanticism displaces the Word of God the Uniting Church is unlikely ever to '*find the way forward*'. Instead, each of us will be left to do what we think is right in our own eyes.

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