

## 'Sex and Society: The Reforming Agenda'

Since the 1960s we have experienced the astonishing advance of 'permissive behaviour' in all areas of public and private life. Self-expression, self-realisation and self-assertion are in the ascendancy. My right to live as I choose, subject only to the consent of another person and provided that I don't cause anyone else harm, has become the mantra of modern society. A young lady recently said, 'I think anyone who is against anyone's lifestyle is just plain wrong.'

In sexual relations, we have come to believe that all sorts of behaviour are 'natural' and to be desired. Repression of desire is the one thing that is undesirable because it is said to stunt personal growth and cause irrational, neurotic feelings of guilt. I must be free to explore 'my sexuality' in ways that meet my needs and the needs of my partner(s). Sexual restraint is the enemy of self-fulfilment; self-denial is harmful to the development of a healthy ego and commitment destroys individuality.

The damage caused by this so-called 'sexual liberation' is evident in a plethora of films and TV sitcoms, such as *Ally McBeal*, *Sex in the City*, *the L-Word*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Big Brother*. Sexual experience itself is glorified as the measure of normality in healthy individuals who 'live life to the full.' It doesn't matter whether sexual intercourse is male-female or male-male or female-female, or how many partners one may have, either concurrently or in series. What matters is mutual self-gratification. Sadly, in reality such narcissism often results in loneliness, despair and ill health.

What has happened to bring us to this point? ... It is not enough to say that we have ignored 'the Bible.' Our culture is now largely hostile to the Christian understanding of what it means to be a person-in-community. ... Sexual experience has become detached from the process of bodily reproduction and the need for children to be raised in a stable environment, as well as from the sense of divine calling to forge covenanted marriages between men and women as signs of hope for faithfulness and love in a disordered world.

The marketing gurus of our post-Christian society have little desire to promote or support faithful marriages because it restricts the range of 'desirable' relationships that can be exploited for commercial advantage. The 'pink dollar' is much sought after! Our bodies are now treated merely as objects of play and part of the entertainment industry. Sex is now treated purely as an individual choice to be catered for in a consumer culture. Sexual preferences are determined, not by the splendid God-given complementarity of male and female, but by who we choose to be as 'individuals.'

This way of thinking about people as 'individuals with diverse choices' has crept into UCA discussions about sex – as well as into our theology, doctrine, ethics and meeting procedures. We begin with how we understand ourselves, not with how we are known by God in Christ as witnessed in scripture. We claim the right 'as individuals' to believe and to do whatever makes sense to us, arguing that God has made each one of us 'as we are.' ... My choices, and all sincere choices, must be respected and accepted as being 'Christian'!

Resolution 84 (R84) is a classic expression of this mindset. The fact that individuals and groups in the UCA come to contradictory conclusions about sexual behaviour shouldn't cause undue distress! It is said that diversity is intrinsically a

good thing! Christians must settle their differences in a civilised manner through a process of consensus which takes account of all points of view.

Ironically, anybody who disputes this way of thinking and acting isn't to be taken seriously. While it is thought to be 'progressive' and 'liberal-minded' to believe in the rights of the individual, those who believe in the unique dignity of our creation as male-female and in marriage as the only divinely appointed relationship in which to enjoy sexual intercourse and to raise children, are called 'regressive,' 'bigoted,' homophobic conservatives. ...

This bullying language is designed to make people forget that, until very recently, these 'conservatives' were regarded as responsible, mainstream citizens. ... It also intimidates those who see that these self-styled 'progressives' are deluded in believing that they are heralding a 'new Reformation.' Nothing could be more 'regressive' or 'repressive' than to base the satisfaction of our sexual needs on 'individual desire' and to endorse sexual behaviour which mocks the clear design of creation of the incredible 'otherness' of man and woman and their unique bond in marriage so joyfully attested in scripture.

It is a mark of the irrationality of our rational society that many people think it is 'radical' rather than 'decadent' for individuals to find sexual satisfaction in using their penises and vaginas in ways for which they are not designed, including ways which contribute to the miserable deaths of millions of people through AIDS. ... Calls for compassion to those who suffer are welcome, but they do nothing to challenge the deadly behaviour!

The situation is so serious that we must challenge those who 'affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and heterosexual experiences of sexuality as gifts from God, part of the marvellous diversity of creation.' No 'gay gene' has been discovered and homosexual behaviour is now widely regarded, like so many other harmful attractions, as the result of complex pre-natal and social conditions and individual choice. Increasingly, homosexuals argue that they choose to be who they are.

Whatever may be the complex factors behind it, the Church, in continuity with the clear witness of scripture, must insist that homosexual practice be treated as one form of the 'perversion' of our created and redeemed humanity. Against the argument that biblical opposition to homosexuality was culturally conditioned by factors which no longer apply to our enlightened culture, it must be said that the prohibition was so strong because they knew the dreadful effects of homosexual practice. That is why, with incest and many other forms of injustice, it is called an 'abomination.'

It makes no sense to exclude homosexuality from this judgment, without also excluding consensual incest. ... This is not scaremongering! In May 2004 a campaign was started to repeal the ban on consensual incest in NZ on the ground that it is a relic of primitive society.

In this new situation what does it mean to set 'The Reforming Agenda'?

First, the Church must proclaim the word of true evangelical grace. In Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified and risen, God's mercy 'for all sinners' has been uniquely embodied. Paul reminds recalcitrant Corinthians that 'they have been washed, justified and sanctified in Christ' (1 Cor 6: 9f).

Second, knowledge of God's grace entails repentance and wrestling with temptation. 'Life in the flesh' (self-indulgence and self-righteousness) must give way to 'life in the spirit.' (Gal 5:13-26). ... To this end, Christians are called to 'bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal 6:2). Paul takes sin seriously as disobedience to the holy will of God but he takes more seriously the reconciling mercy of God 'in Christ.' Sexual misbehaviour is a most serious denial of our marvellous creation as male and female and of the splendour of marriage between a man and a woman. But that does not mean that those who have succumbed to sexual (or other) temptation are to be abused or vilified. Compassion means bearing one another's sins because Christ has already borne the burden of our sins.

Third, the endorsement of behaviour that is clearly and consistently regarded as idolatrous and unethical in scripture must be opposed. It amounts to defiance of God's good creation.

Such is the situation that has been created in the UCA by the Tenth Assembly! Despite what our President, the Rev Dr Dean Drayton, and our General Secretary, the Rev Terence Corkin, still say, R84 was not merely a clarification of the responsibility of Presbyteries in matters of candidature and ordination. It permitted Presbyteries to accept people even if they were in homosexual relationships. The fact that Nepean Presbytery (Vic) has already passed a motion to accept homosexual ministers in principle (22 for / 15 against / 5 abstentions) is proof that the implications of R84 are well understood – as is the formation of RA and a newly formed group 'For 84', the enthusiasm of Uniting Network, the distress of so many congregations and members and, not least, the dismay of our ecumenical partners, some of whom have already suspended bilateral conversations.

It simply will not do to feign ignorance of the real situation and insist that matters of basic Christian doctrine and ethics about the nature of human dignity can be decided on the basis of 'individual choice,' 'tolerance of diversity in sexual behaviour' and a vague concept of 'love.'

The Reforming Alliance is committed to do all that is possible to see that R84 is rescinded so that the biblical witness to the splendour, beauty and wonder of our creation as male and female is reaffirmed as the teaching of the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.' Far from being 'regressive,' conservative or homophobic, this strategy is designed to encourage folk who have lost their way in their sexual (and other) relationships to rejoice in the gracious, healing love of God supremely displayed in Jesus Christ.

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