

CONNECT

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June 2011 Convocation at Christ Church Leeds

CONTENTS

Editorial.....	2
‘In the beginning there was <i>no</i> word...’!!! - <i>Dominic Stockford</i>	3
The Moral Maze - <i>Mike Plant</i>	9
St Stephen’s - <i>Peter Burnett</i>	19
Dates for 2011.....	20
Contact details.....	20

Editorial

The Evangelical Connexion Convocation in June 2011 took place at Christ Church, Leeds – a most successful and enjoyable occasion with most warmly appreciated hospitality. It is intended that at least one of our Conferences henceforth will be held at one of our church locations. Hopefully more from our congregations will join us, and we trust that our Family Conferences will receive children and young people from our congregations too.

The subject we engaged in the addresses at the June Convocation was Scripture, and articles in this edition and later editions will be drawn from the Convocation on this subject. In addition to members of the Connexion, one of our speakers was Mike Plant, General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches, with which we as the EC of the FCE are developing a close relationship. Mike delivered the address on Moral Maze.

Bishop Dominic has made recorded copies of the talks at the June Convocation and if you would appreciate listening to the recording can provide CD sets of the four main talks. Feel free to communicate with him regarding provision of them.

Peter Burnett has given some detail of St Stephen’s Middlesbrough, and its Centenary celebration on Saturday 10 September, 2011, to which all members of the Connexion are invited. I trust you will consider joining us at this event. For further information, please feel free to contact me.



The 2011 Yearbook for the Connexion has been issued to all of our congregations and is available - please contact me if you would value a copy.

Michael John Smithson

‘In the beginning there was *no word*...’!!!

‘In the beginning there was *no word*...’!!!

Had you lived in this country, or what was called Christendom, before 1400 then you probably would have thought that was the case. You would have had every right to think that ‘God’s Word’ was not the Bible, but whatever priests and bishops told you. This handed inordinate and ungodly power into the hands of the clergy and the church – that church being the Church of Rome of course. As we know well, power is not a good thing when placed in the hands of sinners, and as every single one of us is a sinner, every churchman was a sinner, and so the power was misused terribly.

That being the case, Christians of that time had two sources of alleged ‘knowledge’ about God and about Jesus Christ. Firstly they had the words from the mouths of ministers, and secondly they had the pictures apparently helpfully painted onto walls and placed into glass within the churches. Given that most ministers were biblically and theologically ignorant, many not even understanding anything of the Latin in which they prattled on – or that they were only concerned with furthering their own ends and the ends of the furtherance of their denomination – what they were given from those mouths was quite appallingly ignorant and wrong. Even Roman Catholic Bishops of the day were sometimes quoted as being in near despair about the theological illiteracy of many of the clergy and the subsequent complete failings in teaching.

One example of such failing is given in Derek Wilson’s excellent book about the Translation of the Bible into English. It must be good because a) I find agreement on many things, and b) it mentions Teddington! More seriously, he describes the level of understanding of the faith that supposed Christians had. In 1551 Bishop Hopper examined his clergy and discovered that out of the 311, 168 could not remember all ten commandments, 33 didn’t

know where they were in the Bible, 10 couldn’t recite the Lord’s Prayer, and 34 didn’t know who had authored the Lord’s Prayer. That sad fact puts that joke about the dull quiz competitor struggling with the question, “Who wrote Beethoven’s 5th Symphony?” into a new light. If the clergy were so dense, no wonder the people turned to spells, the occult, and various forms of idolatry of relics and the like.

The concept of pictorial representations of Bible stories, or of the lives of so-called saints, had just as bad an effect on the spiritual lives of the people of the time. In some ways the problem with such images is summed up in what we call today ‘modern’ or ‘figurative’ art. Derek Wilson annotates one such misunderstanding – the Church of Rome has decreed that St Nicholas should be the ‘patron saint of children’. Why? Because in early paintings of his work in Asia Minor he is shown with those with whom he worked – and in accordance with the custom of painters of the time, because he is the focus of the picture, he is shown as the largest figure. In later centuries it was assumed that those with were children, rather than the adults they actually represented, and so truth was lost and myth created. When such misunderstanding of the truth, and such transformation of the truth, was so easily done it is quite obvious why pictures, images and stained glass did not help, but in fact hindered, the promulgation of the truth of the Gospel.

And so I return to my opening comment, ‘In the beginning there was no Word...’. Where there was no Bible in the vernacular, which was pretty much throughout the entire known world, there was little true knowledge of Christ or meaning of the Gospel of salvation. Contrary to the opinion of those who opposed the translation of the Bible into English, who thought that would bring heresy, in fact the translation actually reduced the number of heretical views held amongst common folk.

Although, having said that, for many it changed little – because the ignorance and the superstitious Roman practices of their ministers continued to lead them astray. For instance, even after the Bible

had been available in English for many years, it is recorded that in the 1600's:

“A Lancashire woman when asked about the Jesus Christ mentioned in the Creed, replied “she could not tell, ‘but by our dear lady it is sure some good thing, or it should never have been put in the creed, but what it is I cannot tell you’.” [And] an old man from Cartmel, also in Lancashire, a regular church attender, did not know how many gods there were. When Christ was mentioned by his questioner he said: “I think I heard of that man you spoke of, once in a play at Kendall, called Corpus Christi play, where there was a man on a tree, and blood ran down.”

However sad that may have been, one could at least, by then, direct such people to the Word of God, to the Bible, and show them what was written there and what the truth was – of Jesus Christ, of sin, and of salvation by his shed blood. Without the Bible in their own language they would have had little or no hope in changing the position of those people – although they may have told them the truth, they could not show them God's Word. With the Bible, in English, they could then, and we can now, at least direct people to a sure and certain knowledge of God's revelation to us about Himself, about ourselves, about our sin, and about His plan by which we can be freed from the consequences of that sin – Christ Jesus.

It is always to be remembered that the Dark Ages were those when those who claimed to be their Christian leaders denied access to the truth of God's Word to the people of this country. With the Bible in English they, and we, can now not just say, but point to it as we seek to faithfully pass on God's truth:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...” Romans 1¹⁶

And as we seek to point unbelievers to Jesus Christ, because in Him is their only hope of eternal life with God, we would do well to note not just the great sacrifices made in order that we do now have God's Word, but also to note the significance of God's Word.

Inspired by God as it is, what it contains is utterly reliable and completely trustworthy. And for ourselves, as believers, it should be significant to note when and where God warns us about accepting its truth *without* making any changes, whether additions or subtractions.

God had saved his people from slavery in Egypt – he had demonstrated His love for them time and again in so many ways, and yet still they whinged, moaned and acted in ways which were clearly not the way He would want them to. And so, as they camped out in their trek through the wilderness God called their leader, Moses, to Him in order to present them with His commands for their lives. Finally, having shown great patience, God had decided that the time was right not to expect the people to know and understand how to live His way, but to tell them, to spoon-feed them, with how, as His people they were to live. Moses is called to go into God's presence and receive God's Laws by which the people were to direct their lives. The Ten Commandments, as they have been named.

But, knowing the sinfulness and the self-will of mankind, knowing that even when He has laid out for them in black and white (so to speak) the things they should do and should not do, they will change them, they will explain them away, and that they will add to them – before they get the commands God first gives them a warning about His Word to them. He says to them:

“You shall not add to the Word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.” Deuteronomy 4²

Immediately following that, in Deuteronomy 5 of course, God gives them His commandments. And then, as the exposition of those commandments is being made, to underline how important God's Word is, we hear once again, in Chapter 12:

“Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it nor take from it.” Deuteronomy 12³²

“Don't do things your way”, He is saying – knowing full well that mankind will continue to do things our way, placing more stall on

things that come from our own minds than from the mouth of God. “Here”, God is saying, “what follows is what to believe and the way to live life. All you need is here, so don’t be so foolish as to add to it, or to take away from it. That way will lie trouble.”

And so, as God gives us His commands He places a marker post in the sand – a banner to rally around, a fixed point of reference which is always reliable. And not only does He do that here, as God’s Law is given to men, He also places another marker down later on in Scripture. Markers that could be said to put boundaries in place for us. Statements and reminders about what is and is not reliable, about where to turn for the truth, and about the fact that what God gives us in Scripture is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but this is the truth.

In Revelation 22, right at the very end of Holy Scripture, God lays down His marker in front of us once again.

Verse 6: “These words are trustworthy and true.”

Verse 7: “Blessed is the one keeps the words of prophecy of this book.”

Verse 10: “Do not seal up the words of this book...”

...and, of course, verses 18 & 19:

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”

Believing and living by the Bible’s teaching is then, not an optional extra – if you hold it to be God’s Word then it has to be, as we state, “the sole rule of faith and practice”. Because, God being a true, loving and perfect God, God’s Word can only be reliable, it can only be accurate, it can only be true.

It is illogical to do anything other than follow one of two options. Firstly, to reject the Bible as not being God’s Word, and to declare it as being deceitful and dangerous, with nothing reliable at all to be found in it. Or, secondly, to accept it as God’s faithful and true Word

by which we should seek to live our lives, and from which we should seek to make God and what He has done for us through Jesus Christ better known to others. It cannot both be God’s Word, and at the same time be unreliable in any way, because it says so itself.

And because the Bible, about which we have heard much in these couple of days, is indeed the “very oracles of God” –we should therefore do as Peter exhorts us:

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” 1

Peter 4¹⁰⁻¹¹

We should read our Bible, mark what we see there, and learn to live our lives the way God asks of us there. Again, from the Bible itself, the words Paul wrote to Timothy come to mind:

“...devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching...” 1 Timothy 4¹³

Not only turning to and reading Scripture in public, but turning to and reading it in private too – as well as using it in prayer – praying with an open Bible is always a good thing to do. Allow the Bible to exhort and encourage and challenge you, so that your lives are truly directed not by your own thoughts, but by what God has presented for us in the Scriptures. And teaching the truth of Scripture – not necessarily in every detail – but certainly by letting others see and know that what it teaches about salvation through Jesus Christ alone is a life-changing, transforming reality. And, additionally, by seeking to live a life that is in harmony with the gospel message, in harmony with all of God’s Word, we will be teaching others by example about the importance of the faith we have in Christ Jesus.

I heard the other day about an elderly lady who was a regular church-goer, and had been a regular attender at a certain

evangelical church for many years. However, when a new minister arrived he couldn't understand why it was that she left her bible at church each week. So one Sunday he challenged her, very gently and politely of course, about why she left it in the pew. Her answer to him was simple and to the point, as well as wrong! "I don't need it during the week", she said to him. When he picked himself up off the floor he sought to encourage her to understand that, in a practical way, she needed it even more outside the church than she did inside. She didn't grasp the point, and carried on leaving it there in the pew, along with the understanding that it had a message for her to live by outside the church.

So brethren, we now have the Word in a language we can understand – something which many of our forebears were denied - so many have given so much that we might have the Word of Life. Please don't leave that word in the church, but take it with you into the world – whether it is the message of salvation along with the teaching and the life that asks of us, or whether it is the book itself. It is for so much more than simply reading on a Sunday, take with you the gift that is God's Word, in order to live by it, and in order to share it with others.



Dominic Stockford

The Moral Maze

We need to constantly remind ourselves The Scripture is the word of God and we can be fully equipped through the Scriptures for all aspects of Christian Living. It is not just from God but through it he meets our need of moral direction. The issue before us now is really reflected in the title. Mazes are complex and it is hard to find your way through them. We are grateful to God that most aspects of Christian living are not like this. So to be honest, faithful in relationships, truthful in what we say are not options amongst other

ways in which we could live as Christians but are directly commanded by God. The problem occurs when things are not so straightforward and either we can see different commands of God which appear to lead in different directions – there was a classic conundrum expressing this which concerned a man who runs past us and then is followed by someone else already bloodstained and wielding an axe who asks us whether we saw the first man and did we see where he went? Do you lie or do you get implicated in a murder? There are situations where whether we are to obey God is not a question but how we are to obey God is an extremely difficult question. The title I was given reflects on this – it is difficult to find our way through but it is possible. It is a moral maze not a moral dead-end that we face.

FIRSTLY: HOW DO WE COME TO HAVE A MAZE?

What makes decision-making a problem?

Two main things. One is a product of our current situation in the Western World and the other is a product of living in a world of sin and complexity.

Loss of Moral Consensus

I am not defending the British and Western European Civilisation and Values in every respect. However there is no doubt the Bible and Christian Values were a very major influence on the Western Democracies. Had you asked people in the past how a 'good life' was to be lived there would have been a very high chance they would have spoken favourably of keeping the Ten Commandments. What would a moral person be like nowadays? They would care about the Planet and be concerned about being 'authentic' in relationships but that would not mean that they were not sexually promiscuous or that they frequently lied if it suited them. Compare Richard Hannay, hero of 'The Thirty-Nine Steps' to James Bond or, in even sharper contrast, to Lisbeth Salander the female-hero of the Millennium Trilogy ('The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo', 'The Girl who Played with Fire' and the 'The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest') who is bisexual, violent, dishonest and anti-social but is consistently spoken of as someone who is intensely moral in her attitudes. The point is not that historically everybody obeyed the

Ten Commandments, they definitely didn't, but there was a sort of agreed reference point morally in the Christian Civilisation and its values. This creates some problems for deciding how we are to act and to justify our actions in a world which doesn't share our understanding of true belief or true behaviour.

Our Complicated World (1)

We often have to make decisions when it is not at all straightforward as to how we do so. Here is Haddon Robinson writing for Preachers and talking about the need when preaching for accepting that life is complex and applying God's word isn't always easy. Here is the dialogue he had with a sympathetic hearer:

One time after I'd preached a sermon on love, a man came up and said, 'You said that love means always seeking other people's highest good.'

'Yes'

'That's fine but my business puts me in competition with another man in this congregation. I run an efficient operation that lets me sell my product cheaper than his. What is the loving thing to do – under-price him and take some of his customers? Or should I keep my prices roughly equal?'

Before I could respond, he went on.

'But that's not the toughest part. A large corporation has moved into town selling the same product. I'm going to have to a scramble to stay in business myself. I may have to cut prices so drastically it will drive my fellow church member into bankruptcy.'

I want to love this man. We're in the same Sunday-School class. I coach his kids in the Little League. I want to do what's best for him. But the name of the game out there is survival,' he said. 'Why don't preachers talk about these kinds of things when they talk about love?'

The command is uncomplicated but obedience to it isn't.

Our Complicated World (2)

The above example dealt with a question: 'How do I act lovingly to this man in a complex situation?' Some situations however seem to involve breaking one command in order to fulfil another. What happens if you are told something in confidence, and you have wisely or unwisely agreed that it is in confidence, and then you are made aware of facts that mean you are now aware of some criminal or immoral activity which you have promised not to expose? So two commands – truthfulness and love for a neighbour now appear to be in conflict? What do you do?

Having tried to describe some of the reasons we have a Moral Maze I now want to move on to the positives as to how we attempt to deal with the situations we may come across.

SECONDLY: FINDING OUR WAY THROUGH THE MAZE (1)

Getting our Bearings?

How do you make your way through a maze? You want to be aware of the general direction in which you want to head. So if the sun is going down you know which direction West is and you already knew as you entered the maze whether you need to go North, South, East or West in order to find your way through. So it is not difficult to aim generally in the right direction and to keep re-orientating yourself to that direction.

Scripture is not only inspired – it is also sufficient

2 Timothy 3^{16,17}, 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.' Nothing we need to do works that please God is not available to us in Scripture.

God is faithful and will not let us go under without help

1 Corinthians 10¹³, 'No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide a way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.' So faced with a moral dilemma we may struggle but we must proceed with the assumption that God will not let us fall into error or sin if we

continue in faith in him. So we have confidence in Scripture and confidence in the God who gave us Scripture.

When there are conflicting authorities that claim our obedience there is a hierarchy of authority because all authority originates in God and ultimately comes from him

Therefore Paul can use the strongest language about the legitimate authority of government. Romans 13^{1ff}, 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is not authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.' However if the authorities exceed their God-given remit the apostles are equally robust. Acts 4¹⁸⁻²⁰ has the apostles under pressure from the Sanhedrin: 'so they (the Sanhedrin) called them (Peter and John) and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.'

There is a hierarchy of truth in Scripture

There are some matters which are so fundamental that agreement on them is vital to salvation. Consider the preface to the Athanasian Creed: 'Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.' What we are saying is that without grasping some truths we are outside the sphere of God's salvation – the Christian faith, the Gospel, has a crucial and definite faith content. Whether you would want to identify that word for word with the Athanasian Creed is more questionable but the principle is clear. Why am I here? Probably because Dominic and I became friendly through meeting together at Affinity – Affinity unites church groups that hold together the central truths of the gospel whilst differing on what are rightly described as secondary, that is non-gospel truths. So I'm a Congregationalist and in my view of what Scripture teaches local churches are independent and non-connexional. I'm convinced of

this but I'm not as convinced as I am about the Trinity or Justification by Faith and I don't think it is as fundamental to real Christianity. So in some matters we say that Scripture although clear in itself is, owing to our weakness and sin, not always clear to us and that some may have errors in their thinking which are not fundamental to being a Christian or not. So I benefit from Anglican writers as well as Baptists as well as Congregationalists.

In Moral Matters the two-greatest commandments are paramount

Jesus when asked which is the great commandment in the law, answers (Matthew 37–40), 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.' This solves immediately the conundrum of the axe-man pursuing his possible victim – love to God means I must not collude in the murder of someone made in his image and so does love to neighbour and love to the axe-man will mean I seek to keep him from the guilt of murder – hence I lie with a clear conscience.

When there are not direct commands or I am not sure which apply then Scriptural Example may be of great value to me

One of our major problems is living in the present cultural situation. There is no Christian moral consensus and it is both multi-faith and multi-cultural. My situation may be unusual but in the school where I am chair of governors there are (approximate figures) twenty-six different languages spoken and a third of the children don't speak English at home. Now clearly you will not often find the examples you want of how to live in such an unsympathetic environment in the Old Testament history of Israel where they have to defend their culture to defend their faith. Nor in the Gospels which take place in a predominantly Jewish environment but you will certainly find it in Paul's letters, perhaps particularly in 1 Corinthians. You will also find lessons in the Old Testament in books like Ezekiel and Daniel

which relate to the exile and therefore have to face our problem of how to live as believers in a pagan environment.

It may be beneficial to re-examine our assumptions about what the church does

I think this is particularly relevant when we consider some issues that may soon confront us and which are already on our horizon. We have for the most part been assuming a pattern of church life which is based on what has been 'normal' amongst churches in Western Democracies with a background in Christendom. Christendom is that state of affairs when Christianity is assumed as the one dominant religion and as the glue that holds society together. Such a state of affairs, where non-attenders want babies baptised and to have a Christian wedding, is abnormal historically and cannot be said to constitute a biblical ideal. Acts 2⁴² is a simple outline of 'normal' New Testament church life and omits much we would regard as normal or even essential: 'And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.'

**THIRDLY: A CASE STUDY OF COPING WITH HOMOSEXUALITY
Preliminary points:-**

Please don't assume that this can't touch you and your situation

A couple I stay with at one of the churches in EFCC have a relative, the brother of the wife, who is in a long-term homosexual relationship and will expect to share a bed with his partner when he stays.

If you wanted an example of the immense changes in society in our lifetimes this is it

In 1967 I was sixteen and busy being converted and it was also the year in which homosexual acts between consenting adults was decriminalised. Now the failure to provide services on the same basis to gay couples or groups, on the ground of their sexuality, may make you liable to prosecution and this could affect the hiring out of church halls, potentially the failure to offer marriage services and the providing of bed-and-breakfast in your own home.

This is highly sensitive and emotive issue

This is so within the Christian constituency and Gay campaigners can be antagonistic and cunning in their approach. There is such a website as 'www.godhatesfags.com' and that provides ammunition for those, like Richard Dawkins, who seek to undermine the Christian faith. We do have to demonstrate that our attitudes are dissimilar to such websites! We can hate the sin and love the sinner. One of our EFCC ministers was at one time a bus-driver and often because of his biblical convictions would be accused of homophobia. His answer was simple – one of the drivers was flamboyantly and openly homosexual – he would shout to him, 'Am I homophobic?' He would answer: 'He's not homophobic – he thinks it's a sin!'

Our attitudes and beliefs and information which can shape our response:-

Homosexual Activity is sinful

Leviticus 18²², 'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination.' Lest it be thought that this is a Old Testament restriction now lifted, like making clothes using two different materials, the New Testament affirms the same. I Corinthians 6^{9,10}, 'Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.' Notice that the list is very broad, homosexuality is only one type of sin and one type of sexual sin, and that salvation follows repentance. Verse 11, 'And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.'

Its prevalence may be a particular sign of God's judgment

In Romans 1, the rejection of God's revelation in creation and idolatry leads to the fact that (Romans 1^{26, 27}), 'For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.'

The Greek world in which the New Testament was written was not condemning of homosexuality

While there is dispute about the details the reality is that homosexual activity was widespread, although exclusive homosexuality would have been frowned on. There was no particular stigma about homosexuality as such although men were still expected to marry, have mistresses and beget children. The ideal of marriage as having one exclusive sexual partner for life would simply have appeared strange to people – as it does to many younger people today.

We have the same duty of Christian love to homosexuals as to anyone else

Like others they are our neighbours and so we will seek their benefit and we will seek to evangelise them. We are not to put them in a separate category which means we respond to them as homosexuals and not as people. Our next door neighbours are not married but they are living together. Margaret invited Kelly to a church event – we would like to share the gospel with them but the implications as regards their relationship are not where we would start. In the same way with homosexuals, their homosexual activity is only one aspect of their sin and we don't have to deal with that first – that would actually mean that they write the agenda for us by making their sexuality the distinguishing feature about themselves.

We will seek to offend them with the gospel and nothing else

Christians can be homophobic in that we react to their particular sin in a way that we don't to other sin. Notice the list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6: the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers and swindlers. Your respectable Hindu neighbour, an MP who fiddles his expenses, someone who gets wasted on a Saturday night – you may not approve but you certainly don't have an

emotional reaction to them and their behaviour. This has been a serious problem with a number of church groupings. Carl Trueman (somewhere) writes about the way in which homosexual ordination has become a watershed issue in some churches. He points out that if we ordain people who don't believe the Scripture to be the word of God and our only rule of faith and practise; and so may deny the virgin birth, the resurrection, penal substitutionary atonement and much else vital to the gospel; it does reasonably seem like homophobia if the only heresy that blocks ordination is the sexual heresy of being homosexual.

Specific Responses

To Sexual Orientation Laws

Suppose we are running a bed and breakfast business what should we do if we have homosexual couples wanting to use our rooms? If we will not allow unmarried heterosexual couples either then we will certainly not wish to allow this. Now if the law allows us to refuse on the ground it is our home that is fine but that may well not prove to be the case. I would ask whether it is sinful to run a hotel which will have no choice at all in the matter. If the answer is: 'No, it isn't sinful' then I can't see the difference if you run the business in your own home. Paul is clear about the limits of Christian fellowship but very relaxed about business and professional contacts. 1 Corinthians 5⁹, 'I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy, and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.' If it is too much for you to accept this then you simply have to say that the financial hardship of not being able to run the business is something you must accept as part of the cost of discipleship.

If homosexual marriages are permitted in church and then (almost inevitably) become a right

You could operate a 'members only' rule and that may well be legal. However it may simply be necessary for churches to look hard at what they do. Churches haven't always been able to

conduct weddings and non-conformists are still discriminated against in this as compared to Anglicans. Maybe we will need to say, as many churches already do, that we have no license to conduct weddings, we will withdraw from this activity and simply bless the marriages of believers. I recently conducted a marriage for a young couple who used to attend Cannon Park and are now in London. On arriving at the church I discovered the church isn't licensed for weddings so they had gone to the Registry Office and married the day before so this service was simply for the family of believers and not providing a service for the state. That is a pattern we could adopt without breaking the law and while still enabling Christian couples to affirm their new relationship within the faith community.

CONCLUSION

This is a subject with a great potential for divisiveness. There are different ways through a maze and so we will make different decisions on some matters. What I am convinced of is that if we are seeking to follow Scripture and we are genuinely praying for wisdom we will still sometimes make different decisions. We will need to assume the best of one another. I conclude with a quotation more admired than adhered to: 'In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity'.
Mike Plant



ST STEPHEN'S MIDDLESBROUGH

St Stephen's was established in 1908 after a breakaway group of St Peter's parishioners formed themselves into an independent congregation. In 1911 they built a timber and corrugated iron structure as a temporary place of worship – intended to last for ten

years. One hundred years later and it's still standing, albeit with many tell-tale signs of its battles with time and the elements. It's now the church hall and in need of some costly repairs but it has served its purpose tenfold and been worth every pound, shilling and pence that went into its build. Its role as the main place of worship came to an end in 1955 when the present day, brick-built structure was opened. After forty four years and seven incumbent ministers the old church building became the church hall. Since then it has provided useful accommodation for many things and groups – fundraising bazaars, social gatherings, Scouts, Guides and the Sunday School. Many of the original fixtures and fittings were transferred next door into the newer building where they still remain today. Now, after one hundred years of service its future hangs in the balance and the opportunity to celebrate its birthday is not being missed. Congregational members past and present are being welcomed to a special service on Saturday 10th September at 2pm in the church. This will be followed by a buffet and light refreshments in the church hall then a DVD presentation about the life and times of St Stephen's Church.
Peter Burnett

DATES FOR 2011

FAMILY CONFERENCE 28-30 September
[at The Hayes, Swanwick, Derbyshire]

GENERAL COUNCIL MEETINGS

5 July [at Church Lane Evangelical Church, Stafford]
28 September [at The Hayes, Swanwick, Derbyshire]



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