

As set out in [my shorter summary](#), I believe the three articles entitled “Same Sex Marriage & Scripture: Affirming Evangelical Response” which were commissioned by Jayne Ozanne for her Via Media blog are significant and helpful responses to the [Oct 2018 letter](#) from the Bishop of Blackburn and ten other evangelical Church of England bishops. This seeks to explore each response in turn.

## David Gillett: Scripture, Hermeneutics, Creation and Logical Reasoning

The [opening article](#), by Bishop David Gillett, highlights the deeper issue of how we read the Bible and what it means for Scripture to be authoritative. He writes that he still holds “wholeheartedly to the fundamental importance and authority of Scripture”. His disagreement with the bishops and their traditional reading of the Bible is, he says, because he wishes “to expand our understanding of marriage in the light of the questions asked of those Scriptures by our understanding of sexuality and gender *today*”. He helpfully illustrates what he means by this with reference not to the interpretation of “the six or so verses in the Bible, which in some way or another refer to same-sex activity” but to Genesis 2. In so doing he implicitly acknowledges that it is these more foundational biblical texts and the biblical doctrine of creation – particularly God’s creation of human creatures and the institution of marriage – which are more fundamentally at stake in at least some of our disagreements.

### Understanding creation and interpreting Genesis 2

David Gillett offers a response to Genesis 2 in which a gay man imagines himself as Adam, being offered various potential partners by God. Like Adam, this gay man finds many proposals unsuitable but then “after a while a man is presented to him who evokes a totally different level of recognition and response. This for him is what he has been longing for and he exclaims, ‘This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!’ They can become one”.

There can be no doubting that this indeed describes the experience of many gay men. The first person commenting on [Thinking Anglicans](#) testifies to being “moved to tears” with “the very strange experience of recognising myself, in the telling of a story about a man recognising himself, in the story of Adam and his search for a helpmeet”. Offering a theological interpretation of this experience in the light of Scripture is one of the challenging questions for those of us who share the views expressed in the bishops’ letter. It is, however, important to analyse what is being claimed here in David Gillett’s theological interpretation and reading of Genesis.

This is an approach to this chapter which – in exegetical substance, hermeneutical method, and theological conclusions – has no basis in the long Christian (or I believe Jewish) tradition which has devoted great attention to the opening chapters of Genesis over thousands of years. In relation to exegesis, Ian Paul’s comment on the original blog posting highlights three main elements of the text that highlight the importance of the difference between male and female in the text itself: the importance of the unusual Hebrew phrase *ezer kenegdo* to refer to a helper who is different, opposite or matching; the shape of the narrative in which something other than another *adam* is sought; the goal of the narrative as an explanation specifically of the male-female form of attraction and union in marriage.

In relation to hermeneutical method, the article’s approach is highly individualistic and self-centred. This is evident from the dominance of first-person references in David Gillett’s initial reading of Genesis 2 which forms the basis for his proposed re-reading from the perspective of a gay man:

As I read this story for myself, I am presented with a range of possible partners – as was Adam – and I am unsatisfied until I see the other human being – the one who became my wife – and I exclaim, ‘this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!’ For me, and for

most others whom I know this encounter has been one of the most thrilling of all life's discoveries.

The deeper problem lies here – in the method which initially presents itself as leading to a traditional heterosexual reading – not in the reading suggested on behalf of a gay man or the theological conclusion drawn in relation to Scripture and same-sex marriage. It is a method which does not pay attention to the text in its immediate (see above) or wider canonical context (discussed below). It assumes the text is a description of how any human being finds a life-partner and takes as a given my own experience of this quest, hence particularly my pattern of sexual attraction and desire. It then finds that personal experience present in and hence authorised by the biblical text. The article then further argues that others with a similar experience but a different pattern of sexual attraction and desire can legitimately follow the same process in response to the text. They will legitimately “inhabit the story” so as to find it affirming their personal experience and thus leading to different theological and ethical conclusions from those traditionally drawn from Genesis and wider Scripture.

### [The hermeneutical logic of the case for same-sex marriage from Genesis 2](#)

The argument seems to be

(1) that because a gay man (or lesbian) can truly experience what Genesis 2 describes as Adam's response to Eve but they do so for someone of the same-sex *therefore*

(2) what they experience is also biblically sanctioned and approved by God in the Genesis 2 creation narrative. The claim may be even stronger –

(2b) that this passage teaches us that, as regards our desire for an intimate relationship to rectify the fact that is not good to be alone, God's purpose as revealed here is to give each of us what we believe fulfils our need not to be alone; therefore when we experience with someone what Adam experienced with Eve this too is God's provision for us.

Whether in its weaker or stronger form this second claim clearly needs more careful articulation and qualification. I am confident that David Gillett, while he accepts the line of argument when expressed by a gay man, would not accept either of these claims in relation to a man experiencing Adam's response to a woman who is already married to another man or to a person who claimed they were experiencing what Adam did in relation to more than one person, both of which are claims that have at times been made by Christians to justify their actions.

Furthermore,

(3) because Genesis 2 is a description of marriage as created by God, that experienced pattern of love for someone of the same sex must also be recognised as marriage. As a result,

(4) “we will now be able to see the tradition in a fully inclusive way – or, at the very least, hope that others who disagree will allow blessings of same sex marriages – thus leaving a variety of ways of living God's story that recognizes the full humanity and equality of our LGBTI+ brothers and sisters”.

That final claim actually goes even further and shows why our differences here are so difficult to hold together within a single coherent and united witnessing Christian community: David Gillett's statement implies

(5) that those, like the bishops, who cannot accept this hermeneutic and so allow blessings of same-sex marriages are thereby denying some people's “full humanity and equality”.

### Disagreement and the limits of logic

This in turn makes clear that David Gillett does not really believe what he writes under the guise of “a greater generosity – in line with our all-generous God”: “I may be wrong, or they may be wrong, however we need to hold in faith the fact that we may **both** be right!”. That he does not really believe this is not surprising because it is logically incoherent to say two indisputably mutually exclusive truth claims can both be right. The simple fact is that *either* those who, like David Gillett, say marriage as God intends it in creation requires “a commitment to a faithful, life-long and intimate relationship between two people” are right *or* those who, like the bishops, say marriage as God intends it in creation is a relationship which requires (among other qualities) that those two people be of the opposite sex are right. If David Gillett is right then the more specified definition of the bishops, in line with Christian tradition, *cannot also be right*. We may say we are not sure what we believe but if we truly believe one of these views is right then we must of necessity also believe the other is wrong. We cannot “hold in faith” that we may both be right unless that faith abandons reason.

The problems with David Gillett’s approach therefore include its novelty in which what is claimed to be “our understanding of sexuality and gender *today*” (emphasis original) is ultimately determinative of how we interpret Scripture and also its appeal, in line with our contemporary cultural context, to a highly individualistic reading which treats the passage as concerned simply about how each person finds their right partner. There is, though, a further and even more serious problem theologically.

### Reading canonically and Christo-centrally

Despite his claim to be concerned with the Bible as narrative, David Gillett shows no interest in how Genesis 2 fits within Scripture as a whole. Any genuine reading of this or any other text – certainly any that claims to be evangelical - is going to be concerned with such a canonical perspective (e.g., is the male-female structure of nuptial imagery from Genesis to Revelation really so secondary?). In particular careful attention must be given to Jesus’ appeal to the text in Matthew 19 and Mark 10. There, the text is not understood as to be interpreted in the light of each individual’s way of inhabiting the story by reference to whatever way their own, unchallengeable subjective experience mirrors that of Adam when presented with Eve. Rather, explaining the focus in the Christian tradition’s reading of Genesis, for Jesus the narrative of Genesis 2 is set alongside and seen as tied to, perhaps even rooted in, the objective, bi-polar ordering and structure of God’s human creature as male and female set out previously in Genesis 1. In short, according to Jesus, the social practice of marriage is not to be rooted in our personal pattern of desires. Nor in how we believe we find them to be fulfilled. The social practice of marriage is to be rooted in the created nature of human beings. Given this teaching of Christ it should therefore perhaps not surprise us that redefining our doctrine of marriage in the way that David Gillett advocates is now so often also correlated with redefining the nature and significance of human sexual differentiation in our doctrine of humanity as created and redeemed by God.

## David Atkinson: Covenanted Friendship, Sex, Pastoral Accommodation, Blessing, Conscience

The inter-connection of the doctrine of marriage and the doctrine of created humanity is something of which Bishop David Atkinson, [the second author](#), is acutely aware. As a result, his article and its theological method and conclusions are often significantly different. Recognising and exploring these differences opens up some interesting fresh lines of enquiry. These are important for both those who initially seem broadly to share his conclusions (like the other two Davids) and those who initially seem broadly to reject them (like the 11 bishops).

### Covenantal friendship in a fallen world?

The most obvious sign of a different approach here is perhaps the refusal to argue, in the way David Gillett does, for same-sex *marriage*. David Atkinson warns the bishops against identifying “the wording of Canon Law and various Resolutions about heterosexual marriage with ‘the teaching of Scripture’” and rightly reminds us that “Christian understanding of the ‘Scriptural teaching’ on marriage and sexuality has developed”. His concern, however, is *not* to find a biblical justification for same-sex marriage in the Genesis creation accounts and he explicitly writes that “Jesus endorses the Genesis teaching about humanity in God’s image, male and female”. His concern is rather to ask “how is a Christian gay person to make optimum moral sense of his or her life?” and to encourage us to accept “freedom of conscience to disagree” in our answers to this question.

David Atkinson’s citing of Jesus’ teaching on divorce (on which his own earlier work proved so influential for many evangelicals) and description of it as “the best way of making optimum moral sense of a less than ideal situation” is striking. It points to the fact that challenges may still be offered to the bishops’ approach without reworking the doctrine of creation to embrace a range of patterns of sexuality or redefining the doctrine of marriage to include same-sex couples. Instead, in relation to the experience of gay and lesbian people, the challenge to the bishops may be raised in terms of how we best navigate the complexities of living as fallen creatures within a fallen world. This would appear to be an approach that owes much to the writings of Helmut Thielicke and Lewis Smedes and results more in a form of what Oliver O’Donovan and the Pilling Report spoke of in terms of “pastoral accommodation”.

Similarly, David Atkinson explicitly does not argue for same-sex marriage. He wishes instead to commend a form of same-sex relationship as “not incompatible with the doctrine of Holy Matrimony that is affirmed in Canon B 30”, suggesting that it is “possible for a gay couple to make an act of exclusive, loving commitment within a permanent covenanted relationship and to experience God’s blessing in doing so, and find their lives displaying the fruit of God’s Spirit”. What is required therefore is “a broader evangelical theology of covenanted same-sex friendship than can be found in what the bishops refer to as ‘Anglican tradition’” not a new theology of marriage.

This approach raises a different set of questions and in turn is open to a different line of critical questioning. My suspicion is that at least some, perhaps most, of the 11 bishops would be in agreement on the potential in the church exploring a form of “covenanted same-sex friendship”. It is interesting for example, that [Bishop Bill Love’s recent letter](#) in the US opposing same-sex marriage rites is clear that

the Bible does not forbid two people of the same sex from loving one another in the sense of caring deeply or having a strong sense of affection for one another. Strong friendships are a blessing and gift. As already mentioned, God commands us to love one another both male and female. The Bible doesn’t forbid two people of the same sex from sharing a home or life

together. It doesn't forbid two people of the same sex from being legal guardians for one another or health care proxies for one another. All God has said through Holy Scripture regarding relations between two men or two women is that they should not enter into sexual relations with one another, and that marriage is reserved for the joining together of a man and woman.

The question is how that form of friendship is to be defined. David Atkinson's fascinating suggestion is that a canon could state

*The Church of England also recognizes that there are circumstances in which an individual may justifiably choose to enter into a covenanted partnership, permanent, exclusive and life-long, with a person of the same sex, with the hope of enjoying loving companionship similar to that which is to be found in marriage. Such a partnership is not incompatible with the doctrine of Holy Matrimony that is affirmed in Canon B 30.*

This makes clear that the relationship is "similar to" marriage and not marriage. The similarities are seen in it being marked as "covenanted...permanent, exclusive and life-long" and being entered "with the hope of enjoying loving companionship similar to that which is to be found in marriage".

### The question of sex

In considering this proposal, one important question is why the partnership is "exclusive" and what is meant by this. This relates to at least two aspects. One of the hallmarks of "friendship" as a pattern of life is that – unlike "marriage" – it is not "exclusive" in its focus but plural and diverse: we are to have many friends, but only one spouse. The answer here may be that just as marriage has traditionally been seen as a particular and exclusive form of friendship, so this pattern of same-sex covenanted partnership is also a particular and exclusive form of friendship. The two partners have other friends just as spouses have other friends but none of them are this sort of friend to either of them. Their form of friendship with one another is, like the friendship of husband and wife, consciously and publicly qualitatively different from all of their other friendships (not least in it being, like the friendship of marriage, a covenanted and life-long friendship, unlike other friendships).

Much more contentious is something about which David Atkinson is almost wholly silent. When used of marriage, the word "exclusive" includes within it, even has a focus on, the clear sense of *sexual* exclusivity. It is noteworthy that he describes the wording of the canon as "taking our cue from some wording in the forgotten 1979 Gloucester Report". Although he does not cite the wording he has in mind it would appear to be that found in para 168:

*In the light of some of the evidence we have received we do not think it possible to deny that there are circumstances in which individuals may justifiably choose to enter into a homosexual relationship with the hope of enjoying a companionship and physical expression of sexual love similar to that which is to be found in marriage.*

The most obvious and significant difference between this and his own proposed canon is the canon lacks any reference to "enjoying...physical expression of sexual love". What are we to make of this important omission?

Part of the logic is perhaps that (despite the arguments to the contrary proposed by Vasey whose 1995 work *Strangers and Friends* is cited), the traditional view of friendship - which distinguishes it from marriage – is the absence of exactly such "physical expression of sexual love". Unlike many in contemporary society, the church does not support the idea of "friends with benefits". It is precisely

the presence of such sexual activity in most same-sex unions that explains both why many of the advocates seek to call them marriage and why the bishops are opposed to their acceptance and liturgical celebration by the church.

Related to this is the importance, and definition, of chastity for Christians. The bishops in their letter oppose any affirmation of a sexual union other than marriage because they believe in “faithfulness and chastity both within and outside marriage”. This is a commitment which David Atkinson says he too affirms. On a traditional understanding of chastity, entering into “a homosexual relationship with the hope of enjoying...physical expression of sexual love similar to that which is to be found in marriage” is not in fact justifiable as such a relationship is not a chaste pattern of life. Here again is an important area to explore further: what pattern of life embodies the virtue of chastity? Concern that “chastity” was being used by some to include homosexual behaviour as long as it was within committed same-sex unions is what led the 1998 Lambeth Conference to accept an amendment to Lambeth I.10. It was proposed by the current Archbishop of York and replaced “chastity” with “abstinence” so that the final resolution reads “in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage”. It was strictly a better wording also because, as in the bishops’ letter, chastity traditionally is right for all and takes the form of “faithfulness” ie sexual exclusivity for those who are married.

Given this distinction between David Atkinson’s proposed canon and the Gloucester Report, the question is raised as to the extent of real disagreement there is between his proposal and that of the bishops. The bishops’ letter summarises their understanding of the tradition vision they uphold and ask the Church of England to uphold through the *Living in Love and Faith (LLF)* process in these terms:

- (1) sexual intercourse as “an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship” (Lambeth 1988),
- (2) marriage as a union of a man and woman in a covenant of love marked by exclusivity and life-long commitment, and
- (3) faithful, sexually abstinent love in singleness and non-marital friendships

They describe this as “the teaching of Scripture” and claim that “it therefore expresses the character and will of God which is our guide in ordering our lives and in addressing public global ethical issues”.

David Atkinson warns the bishops that identifying this account of their vision with “the teaching of Scripture” is “too bold”. It is, however, not clear from his argument in this article that his own understanding significantly departs from these three points. Nor, on the other hand, is it clear that this three-fold vision defended by the bishops is inherently incompatible with David Atkinson’s proposed canon.

### [Responding to same-sex partnerships - How wide a gulf?](#)

What then might be the continued difference between David Atkinson and the bishops? It is perhaps that the bishops believe the likelihood of “physical expression of sexual love” within a “covenanted partnership, permanent, exclusive and life-long, with a person of the same sex” makes it impossible for the church to affirm the choice of such a relationship. David Atkinson, in contrast, either views such behaviour as chaste within such a relationship or holds that, although strictly a sin against chastity, it is not in itself a ground for refusing the partnership’s recognition in the terms described in the canon. On this latter view the virtues of covenantal friendship being committed to

are the focus of the church's concern and affirmation not any sexual sin within that covenantal friendship (just as the presence of sin in various forms, including sexual, within all marital relationships does not give grounds for refusing to recognise specific marriages).

The article says little or nothing directly as to what recognition of same-sex relationships by the church might look like. However, the current discussions and the article's focus on Jesus pronouncing blessings on the pure in heart and those seeking God's justice as something that can be legitimately pronounced on those who are gay, would point to some form of church blessing. The question left unaddressed is who or what would be blessed. It is noteworthy that the examples appealed to in the gospels relate to individual people whose lives embody certain virtues. The more difficult question is what pattern of same-sex relationship might be blessed by a church which is faithful to Jesus and to Scripture. Here is where the analogy with remarriage after divorce (or, to parallel the blessing pattern, even a service of prayer and dedication for a couple where there is a surviving spouse from a previous marriage) is not as simple as some suggest. In the first place, although Scripture does have a place for remarriage after divorce, it does not for sexual same-sex unions. In addition, in these cases there is no dispute what pattern of relationship is being solemnised or prayed for – it is marriage and in the service of prayer and dedication the couple need to affirm their relationship is marriage as the church understands it. The dispute in relation to divorce is whether it is right to enter that new marital relationship during the lifetime of a former spouse.

As regards same-sex relationships, the six objections raised by Bishop Keith Sinclair in his dissenting statement to the Pilling Report (paras 476-481) still need to be seriously engaged with by those advocating the church should bless these. In particular, his first point (para 476) captures the challenge faced by applying David Atkinson's argument about blessing to support a new form of liturgical recognition:

...the Church cannot hold a public service for a couple simply on the basis that it discerns virtues and good qualities in their relationship. It must also be confident that the pattern of relationship it is affirming is in accordance with God's will. It expresses that confidence liturgically by proclaiming a form of life which is in accordance with God's will and asking the couple to affirm publicly that they seek to live faithfully within this way of life. This means that as long as the Church of England continues to 'abide by its current teaching' it cannot with integrity offer or formally allow a service for any pattern of sexual relationship other than marriage, even though Christians can recognize moral goods, such as love and fidelity, in particular non-marital sexual relationships and qualities of character in the partners. Good, compassionate pastoral care requires the Church to help people to respond obediently to God's love by living rightly before him and thus it cannot be pastoral to affirm a form of relationship which is contrary to God's will

One possible answer is that the "form of relationship which is in accordance with God's will" is precisely that which the article proposes as a revision of Canon B30. There are within Christian tradition forms of service for friendship and the making of brothers which may be looked to for guidance if that is so. Two main concerns about a formal blessing on such relationships would likely be the following.

First, the move from recognising that "an individual may justifiably choose to enter" such a relationship to "the church should formally celebrate such a relationship in its authorised liturgy" is one which needs careful justification. This includes determining *who* would be eligible (for example, must there be a recognised legal union and could that be civil marriage?) and *the definition* of the

commitments being made by the couple. This is particularly important given the lack of an explicit biblical authorisation or longstanding traditional theological understanding of the pattern of relationship and the opposition to it in some parts of the wider church.

Second, and more difficult, is the question discussed above of any sexual element to the relationship. Here there would appear to be four broad options:

- Acknowledgment of a sexual relationship within the liturgy, for example, in promises of exclusivity or descriptions (as exist in the marriage liturgy) of the nature of the relationship. This would go beyond the proposed wording of the canon, represent a change in the church's teaching, and be unacceptable to very many as contrary to Scripture.
- Commitment to abstinence. Were it, on the other hand, to be explicitly required of those in such unions that they promise to refrain from sexual intimacy it would be unacceptable to many, perhaps most, of those seeking formal recognition.
- Silence. The question is then whether, like the proposed canon, the liturgy simply remains silent on this matter, in which case what is understood by it being an "exclusive" relationship would likely need to be set out.
- Teaching but no vows. Rather than total silence, the liturgy could include reference to the church's vision of "faithfulness and chastity both within and outside marriage" (for example in its preface) but not require formal vows to live in accordance with this.

Given the difficulties in agreeing any form of liturgy of blessing, two other options may be considered as a way forward. One would be to have no specific liturgy but to allow public prayers for same-sex couples. The challenge here is that, although not as focussed and explicit as in relation to a formal liturgy, the same questions arise here as to what forms of relationship the church would recognise and how such recognition relates to church teaching and law. That is why the bishops have been careful thus far to encourage private prayers but not public prayers for those in, or entering, same-sex unions.

### *Freedom of conscience and agreeing to disagree?*

Another way forward, increasingly popular way answer to how to proceed is to refer, as David Atkinson does at two points, to "freedom of conscience to disagree". Although he himself does not present this argument, this appeal is increasingly made in order to argue that clergy who wish to do so should be free to bless or marry same-sex couples while clergy who do not wish to do so should be free not to do so. This common appeal, often linked to the affirmation of diversity or "radical Christian inclusion", appears to be unanswerable. Who is going to want to insist on denying freedom of conscience? Its simplicity however masks a range of complex questions.

At a fundamental level we already have "freedom of conscience to disagree". That's why there is so much debate in the church and why these three authors can write as they do. What is therefore being asked for is more: the right to embody that disagreement through the church formally permitting or positively authorising certain actions which are currently prohibited as they are contrary to church teaching even though desired by many within the church. The protest within this form of an appeal to freedom of conscience is not only that an individual should be free to dissent verbally from the beliefs of the wider body of which they are part and seek to change that body's stance. That is already well established. The objection is that freedom of conscience is also lacking when an individual cannot act on certain beliefs because they are being constrained by the wider body. Their conscientious beliefs, in disagreement with the beliefs and authorised practices of the wider body, therefore cannot be expressed in certain concrete practical actions (eg blessing or marrying a same-sex couple, marrying a same-sex partner while being an ordained minister of the



church) or, if they are so expressed, there is the threat, or reality, of negative repercussions from the wider body.

Although this objection and request for what might be called a “mixed economy” of variable practices appears reasonable to many, it does create a number of problems which are rarely addressed.

Firstly, unless we move to a situation where there is total freedom of conscience, there will likely always be some who can make this sort of appeal for “freedom of conscience to disagree”. So, were we to allow a form of blessing for same-sex couples but not a marriage liturgy there would still be those able to make this appeal. The question is therefore not really whether or not there is freedom of conscience to disagree. The questions are rather (a) what the formal teaching should be and (b) what the limits are as regards freedom to dissent from that teaching. In particular, how far that freedom extends in terms of acting contrary to what the church teaches and understands to be biblical teaching and what the consequences are for so acting. An appeal to “freedom of conscience to disagree” does not give an answer to these issues.

Secondly, the move to permit (on the basis of freedom of conscience) people to act in the name of Christ and the church in ways that are currently forbidden is therefore very difficult, perhaps impossible, to distinguish from changing the church’s teaching. So, when we moved to ordain women as priests and bishops we did not simply allow freedom of conscience. We changed church teaching concerning whether these orders were restricted to men. Similarly, if we make changes here we are doing much more than granting “freedom of conscience to disagree”. Depending on the change we are saying, for example, “it is no longer the case that the only sexual relationship the church can approve is marriage” or “it is no longer the case that marriage is a union of one man and one woman”. Simply appealing to diversity or freedom of conscience is again insufficient. The question is whether or not a new teaching can be found that gives a substantive theological rationale for a greater diversity of authorised practice that can be widely recognised and accepted as authentically biblical and Christian. David Atkinson’s proposed change to the canon with its explicit affirmation that this is “not incompatible with the doctrine of Holy Matrimony that is affirmed in Canon B 30” is an attempt to answer that important question which has otherwise received little serious attention.

Thirdly, any move towards those who claim they currently lack “freedom of conscience to disagree” inevitably creates a new group within the wider body who will find themselves having to claim that freedom. In this case, those who cannot in conscience bless any sexual relationship other than marriage between a man and a woman. The standard answer here is that they will not be forced to do this and so there is really no problem. It is though unclear whether those conscientiously objecting will be required to make their churches available for such ceremonies or, looking at the American context, whether bishops will be free to refuse to authorise such services in their jurisdiction. There are also important practical differences between this proposed form of “freedom of conscience to disagree” and that which it is being claimed by those advocating for change. Those seeking change are objecting that, because the wider body prevents them, they currently *are not free to do something* they think they should do. In a “mixed economy” situation what those refusing to marry or bless same-sex couples will be given is *the freedom to refuse to do something* which the wider body used to prohibit but now permits. It is not surprising that this is not an attractive offer. It will require individuals to act in ways that are increasingly viewed as unacceptable in wider society (echoed in David Gillett’s implicit description of this view as a denial of people’s humanity and equality) and even a form of abuse. The experience of those in churches which have taken this step adds further weight to their concerns about accepting such an outcome. It is therefore unsurprising

that those who are offered this as the outworking of “freedom of conscience to disagree” prefer instead to consider, as the bishops’ letter notes, some form of ecclesial “visible differentiation” in which they are not isolated individuals free to refuse but a distinct body of people supporting one another in witnessing to a shared belief.

Fourthly, it may be that an additional, perhaps better, category to explore, rather than simply appealing to “freedom of conscience to disagree”, is therefore that of “faithful and conscientious dissent”. This leads to questions such as the following, whatever view one holds or wishes the church to hold:

- What is required of a wider body in response to those within it who conscientiously dissent from its stance and seek to change it?
- What, in turn, is required from those expressing such dissent and seeking change in order for it to be respectful and faithful to the wider body?
- Are the answers to these questions the same when the dissenters are those challenging long-held traditional beliefs and practices and when the dissenters are those holding traditional views and unable to accept recent developments and innovations?
- In what ways do the answers differ depending on what the focus of dissent is and the nature of the changes which are being sought? Here the question of different levels of doctrinal significance and *adiaphora* need to be considered and are themselves, of course, highly contested.
- What might we learn from (a) how we have answered these questions in relation to women priest and bishops and from ideas of “mutual flourishing” and the Five Guiding Principles, (b) how other churches have handled these questions in relation to sexuality eg the Church of Scotland attempt to uphold traditional teaching as a body but then giving a greater space for ordered dissent in relation to appointment of ministers?
- Can we agree on answers to these questions together - or at least explore them together - given the seeming intractable nature of our differences but the desire (at least in most cases) to recognise that on both sides there are members of the one body of Christ?

## David Runcorn – Development and the Spirit, Going Beyond Scripture & Diversity in Discernment

### *Spirit-led development & going beyond Scripture*

The [third response](#) by David Runcorn opens up a number of other important areas within the sexuality debates that are not addressed in the earlier pieces. In particular it raises the question of development in church teaching and the role in this of the Spirit, Scripture and culture. It helpfully does so on the basis of agreement with the bishops when they write

The church must always be reformed according to the Word of God, and God has “more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word”. But neither can we simply abandon what we have received in order to appear relevant and avoid feeling uncomfortable. As God’s people carefully re-read Scripture together, allowing it to teach us, we may be challenged where we are wrong and be led into deep learning, serious intellectual persuasion, and heart-felt repentance for past errors.

David Runcorn appears surprised or confused that this understanding has not led the bishops to share his conclusions or at least to accept his conclusions as legitimate: “But the letter remains insistent there can be no change in the ‘traditional’ understanding of marriage. I want to ask – on the basis of the letter’s own understanding of the re-forming Word – why not?”.

This is a crucial question to ask but the bishops’ stance is neither incoherent nor inconsistent. Nor is it hard to see their rationale. They are not ruling out absolutely any “change in the ‘traditional’ understanding of marriage”. They are saying that they cannot see how the changes they have seen proposed in relation to same-sex unions and same-sex marriage are “according to the Word of God”. And, in fact, the article’s own approach provides evidence of why they are right and that this is the deeper difference between its author and the writers of the letter.

The only substantive appeal to Scripture made by David Runcorn in relation to the specific question of same-sex unions and marriage is his claim that the traditional texts have been misread. He holds that “these Bible texts condemn abusive sexual behaviour *of any kind*. They are not for applying to what is loving, faithful and committed”. That argument is an increasingly common one but it is one which is highly contested and not simply by those who are “traditionalists”. Luke Timothy Johnson for example writes:

The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to *do* with what the text says? *I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good*

Even if one is persuaded that the classic prohibitive texts do not apply, this simply leaves us having to say something like “Scripture does not directly address our questions about ‘loving, faithful and committed’ same-sex unions”. The question then becomes – if we grant that silence - on what biblical basis we might answer those questions.

One response is, like David Gillett, to go back and re-read Genesis and find there a new, supposedly biblical, doctrine of God’s purposes in creation that helps us redefine marriage and the nature and

significance of being made male and female. Another is, like David Atkinson, to ask how Scripture might help us discern “the best way of making optimum moral sense of a less than ideal situation”. David Runcorn, however, takes a different path. He appeals to being led by the Spirit in going beyond the Bible by means of “an unfolding revelation” so that we go “beyond the received revelation as long understood”.

There are a number of places here where his exact argument is unclear. As noted above, he appears to base this method and his acceptance of same-sex sexual unions on the fact the biblical prohibitions “are not for applying” to our concern as they only deal with abusive sex. However, prior to that he defended a model of unfolding revelation by appealing to the view of Karl Allen Kuhn that “To insist, as some do, that all of the specific injunctions of the New Testament concerning particular behaviours must stand for all time *is to assign to biblical instruction a role that it has never before performed*” (Runcorn’s emphasis). It would appear, therefore, that he is ultimately saying (like Luke Timothy Johnson quoted above) that even if the “specific injunctions” of Scripture were prohibitive of all same-sex sexual behaviour, including in “loving, faithful and committed” relationships, then that would not be conclusive. Here, one suspects, is one of the reasons why he and the bishops end up in different places. Is he, unlike them, open not just to more truth breaking forth *out of Scripture* but to “new revelation” which is apart from Scripture and overturns biblical revelation due to “the dynamic nature of God’s instruction” (Allen quote)?

### *Appealing to Gentile inclusion*

But David Runcorn’s argument is that his position has the support not just of tradition (though the appeal to slavery is weak as it could be argued that where Christians have supported this it reflects conformity to their cultural norms some see in acceptance of same-sex marriage) but of Scripture itself – “an unfolding revelation is evident *within* the scriptures”. Here appeal is made, as is increasingly common, to Acts 15 and the inclusion of the Gentiles. There are many much larger and more complex issues raised by this than Runcorn’s brief discussion can even acknowledge, let alone address and I explored some of these over a decade ago in a Grove booklet, “[God, Gentiles and Gay Christians: Acts 15 and Change in the Church](#)”. A few, however, merit highlighting in order to illustrate the limits and dangers of too simplistic an appeal to this in arguments for same-sex marriage.

The first challenge is of course that the existence of this “unfolding revelation” within Scripture does not necessarily mean it continues in the same way down through the centuries. The existence of progressive revelation in Scripture is not in dispute. There is though the question of how such a claim of unfolding revelation – not just to private guidance but to normative, universal truth - relates to the ultimate significance, even finality, of divine revelation in Christ and the apostolic witness to him. At the very least, the novelty and significance of what is happening in our time is noteworthy. God is apparently now revealing something new he is doing in including gay unions within the life of his people which is equivalent to when he revealed something new by including Gentiles within the life of his people after the Incarnation and Pentecost. Then there is the fact that in Acts 15 the development of welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles into the people of God is one which is based not simply on dreams but on the gathered community reaching a common mind. In this process the consistency of the development with Scripture, cited as the authority in James’ speech, is crucial.

The challenges are not just in relation to process but also substance. Although circumcision is not required in Acts 15, rejection of sexual immorality (*porneia*) is required. This is at the heart of the current debates: what counts as forbidden *porneia*? It seems clear that those gathered in Jerusalem would have accepted the standard Jewish view that this included all forms of homosexual behaviour

and in fact many scholars see the Council's prohibitions as based on the chapters in Leviticus that include rejection of homosexual practice. We therefore either treat their conclusion as normative or we go beyond it through appeal to the ongoing work of the Spirit as we discover that "cultural and social pressure play an important part in raising awareness and awakening conscience in a way that has forced a revisiting of how we have been reading and interpreting the bible for today".

### Diverse Discernment: What is the Spirit now saying? - Gentile inclusion & the argument of Dale B. Martin

The question, then, becomes one as to what exactly it is that the Spirit is now saying, in part through such cultural pressure. This is far from clear among advocates of change. As already noted, David Gillett is clearly a supporter of same-sex marriage while David Atkinson is in favour of a form of same-sex union not incompatible with church teaching on marriage. David Runcorn's position is not explicitly stated but probably involves one of these two stances. There are, however, other gay Christian views which are often ignored or consciously excluded even when there is an emphasis on the need for inclusion and listening to gay Christian voices.

One of the most radical of these, though not without support from others, is that offered by the New Testament scholar Professor Dale B. Martin. His book "Sex and the Single Saviour" is often cited in debates about Scripture and homosexuality, particularly his questioning of the meaning of the two key words used by Paul and seen as rejecting all homosexual practice. In the Inaugural John E. Boswell Lecture in 2008 entitled "[A Gay, Male, Christian, Sexual Ethic](#)" (it can be [watched on Vimeo](#)), Boswell looks how the meaning of sex in our culture is very different from that in the biblical texts and the ancient world and argues that "An ethics of sex must address what sex is. For us. Now. In all its varieties". He then proceeds to talk specifically about "gay male sex" on the basis that although "I actually have, rarely, had sex with a woman... I have known lots of gay men—and I mean that in the biblical as well as nonbiblical sense. I've had lots of sex with lots of men, gay, straight, and bi". So what Professor Martin offers is very precisely defined:

"A" sexual ethic because I don't propose my ideas as being the ethic for anyone, much less everyone. "A gay" ethic because I'm not addressing the meaning or ethics of sex for anyone but homosexuals. "A gay male" ethic because I believe lesbians may need a different approach to sexual ethics if they experience sex differently, about which I know nothing. "A gay male Christian" sexual ethic because this thinking and reasoning is being done selfconsciously in the context of Christian faith, informed by Christian scripture, tradition, doctrine, and community. So that's my topic, a sexual ethic designed for gay Christian men, and quite possibly suitable only for them, and quite probably not for all of them by any stretch of the imagination. But it does seem to work for me, and has for many years.

Having set out his method he then delivers his ethic for this particular group: "Sex is good and Christian when it is done in a way that embodies love appropriate for the relationship in which it occurs".

This ethic leads to his support for same-sex marriage though it is important that this is not because it is necessary for holy living but simply a matter of justice because "although I would prefer that the state and the church get out of the marriage business, as long as they are in the marriage business it is simply unjust to deny gay people the opportunity to marry". He is himself not seeking marriage: "Some male couples I know both want to be married. I am personally, as perhaps a bit more radical Christian, not very interested in pursuing gay marriage. I'm not convinced that marriage is the answer for us gay men, certainly not for myself". Here we see that reasons for supporting same-sex marriage among gay Christians can take a number of significantly different forms.

According to Martin, single gay men who are dating and considering cohabitation or marriage “ought to have sex with one another, in many different ways and circumstances... I regularly counsel young men not to fall too much for another guy and certainly not to make him their “boyfriend” until they have had quite a few rolls with him in various piles of hay. Try it out first.”. Other single gay men may meet their need for sex in other ways – “Many men, for instance, have regular pals they get together with. “Friends with benefits” some call it. I won’t here use the vulgar term that is actually more popular among men. You probably know what I mean. I believe such relationships are perfectly fine”. And this may be more open still –

What about sex among friends? That is, sex that involves more than two people? I must admit, I have not often pursued group sex, and have turned down offers of it, because I’ve tried it and found that it is too distracting and in some cases even disturbing for me. I usually feel a bit guilty if I’m completely drawn to one guy in the party and turned off by another. I get distracted feeling that I have to give “equal time” and energy to everyone. That’s my problem, so I seldom have had group sex. But I don’t think there is anything necessarily wrong with it. Again, as long as everyone is honest, on enough of the same page, and treats everyone involved fairly, I believe group sex can be fine for some people and completely healthy.

There is also no need for a relational context – “with the proper precautions, even merely playful sex with a man you have just met, or whose name you may not even want to know, can be Christian”.

This ethic is then basically extended beyond single gay men to gay couples. Here the agreement between partners as to the basic rule for their sexual behaviour (exclusive or open?, informed or ignorant?, acting alone or together?) is the main limit – “I have friends who have been together for five or ten or twenty or thirty years and for whom sexual exclusivity has never been important to them...they’ve decided that though they cherish a certain emotional exclusivity between themselves, mere sexual exclusivity is not important for them”. There will thus be a variety of such non-exclusive relationships. Martin is clear that no form of them can be stated to be wrong except “if it is not done in love and if it ends up harming them”. He concludes:

But I know too many cases in which such relationships have gone on for years, and for the life of me, I can’t see anyone being hurt by it. In fact, the sexual openness of the relationship, many men will tell you, is precisely what has helped keep their relationships permanent, solid, and loving. This may sound incredible to other people, especially straight people, and perhaps especially women. But I know it to be a fact.

I am not suggesting any of the three writers here would agree with Dale Martin. Why then cite his views, especially as I have always tried (perhaps not always successfully) to critique the “best case” of those pressing for change and not to set up extreme cases in order to dismiss more careful ones? We cannot ignore his views. His is an important voice in biblical scholarship on the subject (as evident from publications and being invited as inaugural John Boswell lecturer) and at least some of his views, although rarely set out as fully and clearly, have been supported by other gay Christian writers. In addition, many of the lines of argument – the focus on love, the need to consider personal lived experience of individuals and the LGBT community, the difference of our world from the ancient world as crucial in appealing to Scripture etc – are common elements in many arguments for less radical arguments for change. His views were also what lay behind the very broad ethics in the statement of conviction established when the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement was founded in 1976:

It is the conviction of the members of the Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement that human sexuality in all its richness is a gift of God gladly to be accepted, enjoyed and honoured as a way of both expressing and growing in love, in accordance with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Therefore it is their conviction that it is entirely compatible with the Christian faith not only to love another person of the same sex but also to express that love fully in a personal sexual relationship.

When LGCM recently changed its name to [OneBodyOneFaith](#) it made changes to the statement but, despite the existence by then of both civil partnership and civil same-sex marriage, it did not change this ethical vision to set the vision of “a personal sexual relationship” in a more specific, morally normative description or category:

It is the conviction of the members of OneBodyOneFaith that human sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity in all their richness are gifts of God gladly to be accepted, enjoyed and honoured as a way of both expressing and growing in love, in accordance with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Therefore it is their conviction that it is entirely compatible with the Christian faith not only to love another person of the same sex, but also to express that love fully in a personal sexual relationship; We believe that expressing our gender and sexuality with integrity is important as a way to grow in love and discipleship; we long for the day when Christians fully accept, welcome, affirm and offer equality to everyone in their diversity.

The reaction of many Christians to Martin’s proposed “gay, male, Christian sexual ethic” will I suspect be similar to that which Runcorn cites from a conservative opponent of *any* form of same-sex relationship: ‘I feel as if my face is being pushed into vomit.’ However, as Runcorn rightly points out this cannot be our guide: “On his Joppa rooftop Peter would have understood that feeling very well. But he learned that revulsion is not a reliable guide to good theology, divine will and purpose”.

Here is why Martin’s work is particularly important in relation to David Runcorn. He is puzzled as to why, especially given their apparent agreement that our relationship with Scripture is “always unfolding, never exhausted and where understandings may need to change and evolve over time”, the bishops cannot follow him to his conclusion or at least recognise its validity. It is therefore important to work out why the bishops do not reach his conclusion and whether their stance is coherent. It is also important to work out why Runcorn, given his method, cannot follow Martin or at least recognise that his conclusions are legitimate and an acceptable application of the same method. Is such a stance consistent and coherent?

One line of response would be related to the specific biblical texts. David Runcorn’s reading (which he is not able to defend here) is that “those texts traditionally presumed to be teaching against homosexual relationships in every case describe subjugation, rape or violence, excessive lustful activity, patterns of coercive male dominance and a total disregard of acceptable norms of social, religious and sexual behaviour”. Martin’s ethic can I think avoid the majority of these descriptors although it faces challenges with “excessive lustful activity” and “a total disregard of acceptable norms of social, religious and sexual behaviour”. But what counts as “acceptable norms” as these are clearly very variable and rapidly changing in our culture and many churches? In addition, “excessive” needs definition and Martin would I’m sure argue that his ethic is not “lustful” but focussed on love. In any case, Martin may accept Runcorn’s list as to what the New Testament prohibits but simply respond, given his emphasis on cultural difference between the biblical world and ours, that “to insist, as some do, that all of the specific injunctions of the New Testament

concerning particular behaviours must stand for all time *is to assign to biblical instruction a role that it has never before performed*”.

Runcorn’s main argument, though, is not about how to read the classic, specific texts but to do with development and the model set out in Acts 15. Turning to the appeal the Gentile analogy it is clear that Martin can appeal to this for his conclusions just as Runcorn can. In fact he may even have a stronger case. The passage is often read in such a way that the Jews represent the heterosexual majority. Gentiles are then the excluded LGBT minority (the relative sizes showing one of many dis-analogies) who now need to be included, whether in the church or in the institution of marriage. But no conservative is wishing to exclude people because of their sexuality. Their concern is to exclude behaviour which they believe God in Scripture condemns and warns can exclude people from the kingdom of God. The question therefore is, as noted earlier, what counts as *porneia*. Here the appeal by analogy to Acts 15 on its own cannot rule out Martin’s argument and indeed could support it. Runcorn notes that the real struggle was whether Gentiles were to be welcomed “*on Jewish terms*. That is why so much of the argument centred around how *Jewish* Gentile believers needed to become”. Martin, one suspects, might argue along the following lines. In defining *porneia* to permit same-sex sexual activity but to then require adherence to sexual exclusivity or marriage on the part of *gay men* (as Runcorn does) is, by analogy, to welcome gay men only on *heterosexual* terms and in fact we need to consider much more seriously ‘how *straight* queer believers need to become’. Runcorn and his followers, in imposing heterosexual norms on gay men are, in fact, remarkably similar to the conservative Jews who wanted to impose Jewish norms on Gentiles.

### Scriptural authority, development, and an unchangeable Christian standard in sexual ethics?

Underlying all this is also the question as to whether there is in any sense a single, universal, sexual ethic or “unchangeable Christian standard” which the church has received as God’s will for us as human beings. It appears that Martin does not think there is (although it is not clear what ethic other than “Sex is good and Christian when it is done in a way that embodies love appropriate for the relationship in which it occurs” he would think right for groups other than gay, Christian men). In contrast, the bishops’ letter argues that there is such an ethic. It speaks of “the need for the church to offer a coherent, single ethic for all of us as people whose fundamental identity is not something we define for ourselves: rather that we are made in God’s image, have fallen captive to sin, are redeemed by Christ, and are being sanctified by the Spirit”. It sums this up by reference to two Lambeth resolutions – “faithfulness and chastity both within and outside marriage” (1978) and “a pure and chaste life before and after marriage” (1920).

David Runcorn critiques this latter reference. He writes that it “is unfortunate in being lifted from a highly reactionary and conservative debate opposing contraception. In its original context the quote is supporting a view of marriage and family the church, and these signatories do not hold”. But the bishops are not claiming to agree with all the 1920 resolutions. They are highlighting that Anglicans have consistently held to this standard and then articulated it more fully. The question they are asking is whether those pressing for change are also rejecting this broader standard. If so, for example, also allowing sex before marriage or consensual open marriages then there needs to be honesty about this and justification of its more radical stance and implications (something [I explored some time ago](#)). If not, there is a need to show convincingly how and why this broader standard remains a constant in the midst of change and development. Are their proposed changes in relation to same-sex unions consistent with this standard? As noted in relation to David Atkinson’s article this might mean redefining traditional understandings of chastity and purity (eg to embrace within it



exclusive, lifelong sexual same-sex covenantal unions). Furthermore, can they persuade the church that the new articulation of this standard so as to accept within it behaviour which was previously prohibited does not undermine what the traditional teaching sought to protect? This is what has been done by Anglicans since 1930 in relation to the use of contraception within marriage and what needs to be done now in relation to same-sex unions if appeals to that earlier development within Anglicanism are to carry any weight.

Here again we also return to the recurring, underlying and crucial question of the place of Scripture in arguments for change. The first reason that the 1930 Lambeth committee gave for revising the earlier resolutions on contraception were that although its proposed revision rejected 'a very strong tradition that the use of preventive methods is in all cases unlawful for a Christian', this tradition 'is not founded on any direction given in the New Testament'. As we have seen there remains ambiguity as to what Runcorn, and many others advocating change (especially those identifying as evangelicals), are saying in relation to development led by the Spirit and the place of Scripture.

Is it that the Spirit is showing us we have misread Scripture and that a very strong tradition that homosexual behaviour is in all cases unlawful for the Christian is in fact "not founded on any direction given in the New Testament" and so, learning from a combination of Acts 15 and our culture, we need to be led by the Spirit? If so, then, in response to Scripture's silence on the specifics, we need to work out how we read Scripture as a whole in relation to sexuality and how we do justice to both tradition's negative stance (even if not authorised by Scripture) and the arguments for a more positive stance in our current context.

Or is it that the Spirit is now showing us God is doing or revealing something new just as he did to Peter at Joppa and that "to insist that....the specific injunctions of the New Testament concerning particular behaviours must stand for all time *is to assign to biblical instruction a role that it has never before performed*"? If this is the case then there is an important distinction between whether God is simply revealing what Scripture kept hidden or even contradicted or whether God is (as in Acts) doing something new in human history which makes acceptable within God's people what previously was unacceptable.

In both cases – whether Scripture is silent or superseded - it remains unclear how appeal to the inclusion of the Gentiles or indeed any other criteria will, on its own, guide us as the church to choose between the varying options on offer – same-sex marriage (Gillett and probably Runcorn), same-sex unions compatible with teaching on marriage (Atkinson), or some other more radical proposal such as that advocated by Dale Martin.