

# **Five Uneasy Pieces**



# Five Uneasy Pieces

## Essays on Scripture and Sexuality

Introduction by Michael Kirby  
Foreword by Bill Countryman



Adelaide  
2011



# Table of Contents

---

<b>Preface</b>	vii
<i>Mark Burton</i>	
<b>Foreword</b>	xi
<i>William Countryman</i>	
<b>Introduction</b>	xix
<i>Michael Kirby</i>	
<b>Chapter 1</b>	1
Were the Sodomites Really Sodomites? Homosexuality in Genesis 19	
<i>Megan Warner</i>	
<b>Chapter 2</b>	13
On ‘Not Putting New Wine into Old Wineskins’, or ‘Taking the Bible Fully Seriously’: An Anglican Reading of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13	
<i>Richard Treloar</i>	
<b>Chapter 3</b>	31
Reading Romans as Anglicans Romans 1: 26–27	
<i>Peta Sherlock</i>	
<b>Chapter 4</b>	47
Keeping Lists or Embracing Freedom: 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 in Context	
<i>Alan Cadwallader</i>	
<b>Chapter 5</b>	69
Rules for Holy Living: A Progressive Reading of 1 Timothy 1:8–11	
<i>Gregory C Jenks</i>	
<b>List of Contributors</b>	85



# Preface

Mark Burton

---

The Fourth Earl of Roscommon's (the C17 Irish poet, Wentworth Dillon) advice to his and others' readers was that one ought 'Choose an author as you choose a friend'. In this is there is something fundamental about *trust*.

Five authors and their 'uneasy pieces' are gathered in this collection to be the voices of friends for many within the life of the Church—Anglican or otherwise—for whom an unchosen path has often meant a life on the margins, or a life (necessarily) dissembled.

This collection of essays represents the next phase in a conversation.

The idea was put to the Reverend Nigel Wright for a reasoned counterpoint to some of the more strident declarations on what is or is not a (often *the*) Christian expression of human sexuality. This declarative stridency is often shaped by an interpretative and exegetical method that is inclined to use the Scriptures as a blunt instrument, with immediate recourse to the 'plain reading' approach.

Fr Wright gathered five Australian Anglican scholars—all of whom take the Bible with great seriousness (or 'fully seriously', to borrow from the argot employed by one of the authors)—and asked them to consider making rigorous examinations of the 'anti-homosexual' (itself, an imported category) texts of the Bible.

The Reverend Drs Alan Cadwallader, Peta Sherlock, Gregory Jenks, and Richard Treloar; in company with doctoral candidate, Ms Meg Warner, have provided careful and studied insights to the world of the Biblical authors, whom they have treated with respect.

But none of these scholars appears attracted to either wooden readings of the texts, nor to knock-down answers to complex questions: that many contemporary Christians in their observation and experience lead lives

of devotion and faith, demonstrating what St Paul styled ‘the fruit of the Spirit’—while living lives that are ‘differently ordered’ in loving, same-sex relationships—will not allow for over-simplification which ignores a living reality.

‘Keeping Lists or Embracing Freedom’ (Cadwallader); ‘Reading Romans as Anglicans Romans 1:26–27’ (Sherlock); ‘Rules for Holy Living’ (Jenks); ‘On “not putting new wine into old wineskins”’ (Treloar); and ‘Were the Sodomites really sodomites?’ (Warner) make for thoughtful launching-places for considering what the Bible may or may not have to say about same-sex relationships and activity.

Hence, these essays are timely, given the nature of political debate and community discussion around the question of same-sex marriage. The Church will want to be part of the conversation, and it must surely begin by listening to a range of voices, including those within its own community who experience the Scriptures differently on some points.

The essays contained in this collection are deliberately scholarly in their approach and, as such, are not always an ‘easy read’. People with a theological education—from pre diploma through post graduate—stand to benefit most.

In addition to these essays there is a set of shorter ‘extract’ essays written by the same authors. These have been written specifically with the ‘lay person in the pew’ in mind and are published by Changing Attitude Australia: available both in hard copy form or as a download.

These two publications, worked together, could well be part of a more structured curriculum study for senior secondary college, diploma and/or degree students, as well as for parish or group study purposes.

Fr Nigel Wright and the circle of scholars he has gathered are to be commended for their open and rigorous engagement with the text: the conversation would likely as not be the poorer without it.

\*

This short preface was written in a period of so-called ‘ordinary time’ in the Church’s year. As it happened two of the Bible readings set for Evening Prayer in the next Sunday contrasted the extremes of Scripture: the one, a reading from the Hebrew Bible that declares the words of Torah, engraved on tablets of stone, ‘the writing of God’.

The other, St Paul’s ‘Corinthian postcard’ from the end of his letter *To the Romans*, replete with multiple greetings, a possibly interpolated po-



lemic, and even a quaint 'cheerio call' from the scribe, Tertius. Yet, of the two, which is more or less authentically 'scripture', which one the greater and more authoritative vehicle for the voice of God?

Only honest study and conversation are likely to lead to a helpful understanding, and assist in maintaining the integrity of the Bible in our experience; we need the voices and experiences of the many, and not merely the few. So it is with *Five Uneasy Pieces*.

Bishop Mark Burton  
Dean of Melbourne



## Foreword

# Scripture, Homosexuality, and Anglicans: Creating a Conversation

L William Countryman

---

The academic conversation about scripture and homosexuality is more than fifty years old if we date it, as is usually done, from the publication of Derrick Sherwin Bailey's *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* in 1955.<sup>1</sup> The ecclesiastical conversation among Anglicans (admittedly, more like a brawl at times) is younger, but not by much, for the British Wolfenden Report of 1957 made the topic one that the Church of England could not altogether avoid. The two conversations, academic and ecclesiastical, are entangled with each other. Scholarly study of scripture affects the church's reading of it, and church affiliation can affect what scholars look for in the text. Reading is never free of preconceptions. At most, we can hope to read with enough care to begin disentangling what we bring to the page from what we actually find there. Even then, interpretation necessarily involves bringing the world of the text and that of the reader into some kind of mutual intelligibility. There is ongoing conversation between text and reader—and, for that matter, between reader and reader.

One might assume that fifty years is enough time for the significant issues to be raised and the major contributions to be made. Is there anything more to be done than repeat the same arguments and wait for 'the other side,' whichever that may be, to die off—a phrase I have heard scientists employ informally to describe the process of changing scientific paradigms? In this case, there is indeed more to do. The church and the theological and humanist studies that deal with scripture operate differently from the sciences. Reading is not a process that leads to a single, final encapsulation of the meaning of the text—an imprisonment of it,

---

1. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans Green, 1955).

as it were, in other, clearer words so that it will not again dare to mean anything new. Any one who has been reading Scripture for more than a few years will have learned the folly of such an idea. Scripture reveals more and more of its meaning to us as we grow in grace, as we are transformed by the Spirit working in and through it—and even as we grow in ordinary human experience. Reading about the wars of ancient Israel is a very different experience for me now, steeped in the news of decades of violence in the Middle East, than it was when I was a boy of ten or twelve, fascinated by tales of warriorly derring-do.

The essays in the present collection deal with oft-studied texts that have long figured as critical for any discussion of scripture and homosexuality. Even so, there are fresh scholarly perspectives here and at least one significant proposal that I have not seen before. The value of this collection, however, goes beyond the narrowly academic and offers much to the ecclesiastical conversation as well. It has two particular gifts to give. One is that it enlarges the geography of the conversation to embrace Australia. I do not mean to suggest that Anglicans in Australia have not already been engaged with the issue; but, for too long, the academic discussion of the topic was largely the preserve of the North Atlantic world. Being myself on the Pacific fringe of that North Atlantic world, I am convinced that the conversation can only profit by being further widened. New voices bring new perspectives and the potential enhancement of everyone's understanding.

The second gift these essays offer is that all the authors have articulated, in clear and accessible ways, how they see the academic and the ecclesiastical conversations as interacting with and informing one another. While all these essays are focused in biblical studies, their authors have not allowed academic specialisation to discourage them from speaking in theological terms as well and, indeed, from framing their arguments in ways that contribute directly to the church conversation of which they are also a part.

All this makes the present volume timely. The continuation of the Anglican Communion has been threatened, in the last few decades, by our conflicts over homosexuality—conflicts coming on the heels of (and many would say rooted in) earlier and still incompletely resolved disagreements about gender with particular reference to the ordination of women. And if the Communion finds itself in danger of fracturing over the specific questions of ordination and marriage of lesbians and gay men, this is at least

partly the consequence of a longstanding seismic fault running down the middle of its intellectual life as regards how we read Scripture.

For a long time, different traditions within Anglicanism have persisted in reading Scripture in their own specific ways with little communication across the gaps between us. One consequence has been that we no longer speak clearly—and perhaps no longer think clearly. Each separate Anglican strand takes too much for granted. As long as we cannot articulate our fundamental presuppositions in ways that are intelligible to one another, we cannot persuade one another of our conclusions. More precisely, we can neither refute the arguments of others nor be persuaded by them because we cannot even engage them in conversation. It is as if conservative Evangelicals and Catholics, on the one hand, and more liberal (for want of a better word) Anglicans of all sorts, on the other, were speaking two mutually unintelligible languages made doubly confounding by the fact that both derive from a common ancestor and use a great many cognate terms that have developed seemingly unrelated meanings.

These have to do above all with Scripture and how we read and interpret it. If the ancestral language holds that ‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation’ (Art VI), the daughter languages use these same words with very different import. And since each daughter language is understood by its own users (or, at least, so we assume), we have often found no need to make that import clear outside our immediate linguistic community. If we are to move beyond this impasse, we shall have to learn new ways of making ourselves clear, new humility to listen closely to our presumed opponents, and the candor to challenge one another and to respond generously. The alternative is to retreat from this difficult exchange with Christian sisters and brothers into the illusory safety of the breaking of communion. The creation of a ‘pure’ church, where all are in agreement, may at first seem to promise the fresh air of mountain heights in place of the verbal smog that pollutes our common life at present. In reality, this pulling away to create purity seems to lead more often to new disagreements, anger, and further schism.

When one contemplates the long catalogue of what we might call ‘para-Anglican’ groups,<sup>2</sup> it is difficult to feel that voluntary secession from the larger Anglican unity is often a fruitful response to conflict. And once pieces have been broken off it proves difficult to call the fragments back together. The Anglican Church in North America is attempting this feat

---

2. Eg, the list at [anglicanonline.org](http://anglicanonline.org) under the heading ‘World Anglicanism: Not in the Communion.’

and does appear to serve as an umbrella for a variety of such fragments broken off over the last century and more. Yet, its constitution seems, at least to this reader's eye (admittedly untrained in such legal matters) to be little more than a loose association of essentially independent pieces, and its primate seems unable to restrain even parishes in his own diocese from negotiating property settlements with The Episcopal Church against his wishes. The seeds of schism are not to be sown lightly.

At the same time, the effort to save the Anglican Communion by suppressing disagreement is no more likely to contribute to spiritual and social health among us. Despite the denials of its advocates, this seems to be the real purpose of the proposed Anglican Covenant. Centralisation of Anglican authority in a relatively small and overwhelmingly clerical body threatens to bring about a rejection of the diversity and the emphasis on local initiative that have long been cardinal elements of our polity, starting with the Church of England's Reformation insistence that national churches must make decisions on their own and not simply function as creatures of a universal authority.

The spiritual principle undergirding our emphasis on the national or regional church is that no single Christian perspective can always be decisively correct. As Anglicans, we have not translated our insistence on the centrality of Scripture into a claim that we ourselves have a perfect grasp of its meaning, nor have we displayed an eagerness to excommunicate our opponents—even the sixteenth-century popes who excommunicated us. Rowan Greer's painstaking and judicious study of Anglicans and Scripture over the centuries amply demonstrates this point. And it leads him to describe 'the chief characteristic of Anglicanism' as 'a horror of absolutes and of infallibility.'<sup>3</sup> It is a phrase worth carrying with us as a kind of touchstone of our relation to our tradition.

The question of the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the church will not quietly disappear from view simply because it is inconvenient to the church. It cannot because it is rooted in the life of faith for those who raise it. And when Anglicans find themselves seriously at odds with one another in terms of our evaluation and response to these challenges there can be no really useful way forward other than to confront one another patiently, seriously, and openly, to seek language in which we hope to make our positions intelligible to one another, and to look for common ground.

---

3. Rowan A Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co, 2006), 152.

The authors in this volume make significant contributions to such a process. Not that they actually constitute the conversation for which we long, for they all represent the same broad tendency in contemporary Anglicanism, affirming that there is room for gay and lesbian people to be full members of the body of Christ without first consigning themselves to mandatory celibacy. But they do offer a step toward the broader conversation by clearly presenting how they understand Holy Scripture as guiding us in this conflict. They offer accounts both of how they read and of what they read. Such work cannot, of course, settle the dispute; it can only be offered as a gift that makes further conversation possible. And that, in fact, is a good description of this collection of essays, taken as a whole.

No written document, after all, is entirely self-interpreting. There are methods of careful reading that help us avoid misunderstandings, but it is rare for the written word to be completely unambiguous. That, in turn, often leaves the careful reader in a state of uncertainty. Plato, in the fourth century BCE, was already complaining about the written word's inability to answer questions addressed to it.<sup>4</sup> And what may be little more than a nuisance in contemporary writing becomes a major hurdle when we are reading Scripture, parts of which are almost three thousand years old and even the most recent nearly two thousand.

The world has changed a great deal in that time. To give one example, the democratic mode of government now considered the norm among most of the world's more stable and just nations was scarcely to be found in antiquity. Even the polity of fifth-century Athens was a democracy of a very different sort than we generally mean by our use of the term. Consequently, the Scriptures could speak volumes about how to be a good subject in a monarchy, but had little to say directly about how to be a good citizen of a democracy.

Again, slavery was very much the norm in the millennium when the books that now make up the Christian Bible were being composed. About two hundred years ago, some Christians began seriously questioning whether slavery was really consistent with God's word in scripture, but others pointed to the prevalence of slavery in the Bible and the general lack of any explicit opposition to it as evidence that scripture authorised the institution. The latter argument would be almost universally rejected by Christians today, but the Bible itself could not and did not offer a decisive word in the matter precisely because it was immersed in its own times

---

4. *Phaedrus* 275.

and cultures, as every writing inevitably is, and could not speak directly and unambiguously to later Christians on the subject.<sup>5</sup> In the US, it was the abolition of slavery after the Civil War that brought an end to Christian apologia for slavery, not any decisive argument from Scripture.

The reader's own context is always one important element in interpretation. After all, 'interpretation' means making sense of something unintelligible to the reader in terms that the reader can understand. The bridge of interpretation only functions if it is anchored at both ends. The history of interpretation is replete with instances in which a text that seemed to mean one thing at one point in church history has been seen as meaning something rather different in another. Only consider the wide range of interpretations of Matthew 16:18: 'You are Peter, and on this rock . . .', which has meant quite different things to Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christians. Accordingly, the interpreter needs both to investigate the ancient context of the document and to take seriously the modern context of the hearer. Only thus can there be a credible hearing of the word.

All the authors in the present collection of essays speak directly to the challenges and problems of interpretation. Megan Warner gives us a quick review of how varied interpretation of the Sodom story has been, beginning with references in the Hebrew Scriptures and continuing on into some significant examples from early Christianity. Richard Treloar gives us a very helpful review of Anglican ways of reading Scripture. Peta Sherlock places the Anglican tradition in this regard in the context of some recent developments, including feminist contributions. Alan Cadwallader makes his interpretive approach clear by explaining why he emphasises certain contexts for the particular passage he is working with. And Gregory Jenks argues that, given the very nature of interpretation as facilitating communication between ancient text and modern reader, the reader's response must have a decisive role.

These different approaches to interpreting scripture make a difference to how the text itself is read. Jenks, for example, given his high estimate of the reader's role, is prepared to question the significance of 1 Timothy, at least partly on the grounds that it is probably pseudepigraphic. One is reminded of Luther's willingness to sideline whatever in the New Testament did not seem to him to come up to the high standard of the Bible's central message. Warner, having observed that the Sodom story is seldom asso-

---

5. The Clapham Sect were not, to be sure, the first Christians to raise this issue, but they represent the beginning of the modern abolition of slavery in a way that Bartolome de las Casas, for example, did not.



ciated with homosexuality in antiquity, brings the conventional modern interpretation into question by a careful reading of the text, its context, and a parallel text in Judges. Treloar, on the other hand, accepts a relatively 'conservative' reading of his texts from Leviticus, but shows that this does not settle what they mean for us today. Sherlock places Romans 1 in the larger context of Paul's theology rather than treating it as intelligible in isolation. Cadwallader perhaps hews closest to the historical and literary criticism that is my own preferred approach to Biblical studies (though all the essayists make good use of it). In the process, he offers a uniquely unified reading of an important segment of 1 Corinthians that has usually been taken as a jumble of scarcely related topics.

None of this is to suggest that our five writers are proposing a single, firmly codified method of interpretation. But they are individually clear about how they proceed. Neither do they interpret their texts in a way dictated by a party line. They respect the texts that they are interpreting and show this respect by examining them with care. We have here a series of careful and balanced readings, showing awareness of the available scholarship and even taking it a step beyond what has previously been observed. In other words, the present collection is made up of intentional, disciplined scholarly explorations of the handful of texts most often cited as relevant to sexuality issues. They deserve to be taken seriously as resources for the ongoing ecclesiastical and theological conversation throughout the Anglican Communion.

Whether the offering of these essays will help further the conversations we need will also depend, of course, on the willingness of other parties to take a comparable risk by joining the conversation in a similar spirit. If they assume that they already know the full truth and need only reiterate the position they have always maintained, they open themselves to the suspicion that they are claiming infallibility. Let them, instead, lay out with a clarity comparable to that represented here exactly how and why they interpret the texts as they do. And let them explain their method for the rest of us in ways as broadly intelligible as we find in these writings. If we simply repeat the language we speak with our fellow-partisans, we cannot hope to move beyond the present impasse.

There are signs that genuine, faithful conversation is indeed possible. In the US context, many opponents of the new openness to lesbians and gay men—indeed, probably the majority of them—have decided to remain part of the Episcopal Church rather than secede. This creates the opportunity for new ways of conversing with one another as distinct from

merely firing the artillery of scriptural texts across party lines. Perhaps we are even on the verge of such conversation. A recent commission produced a theological report on same-sex relationships for the bishops of the Episcopal Church. And Eugene F Rogers, Jr, a member of the commission, reports that, while the group remained divided, it actually began to find some common ground in an unexpected text—Ephesians 5—where both sides might be able to begin thinking together about the spiritual goals of marriage. He also notes a willingness on all sides to set aside partisan language and lines of argument that had not proven mutually intelligible, a turn that can only benefit the conversation.<sup>6</sup>

Whether this or any other new opening will bear fruit is still an open question. But the importance of this effort cannot be overstated. One of the basic qualities of Anglican Christianity is an esteem for the church as community, a desire to maintain communion with one another, even when we do not agree, and a reluctance to excommunicate. These values may now have a chance of reasserting themselves.

---

6. 'Same-Sex Complementarity: A Theology of Marriage,' *The Christian Century*, vol 128, no. 10 (May 17, 2011): 26. The commission's report can be found in *Anglican Theological Review*, vol 93, no 1 (Winter 2011): ix–145.

# Introduction

The Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG<sup>1</sup>

---

## Inconvenient truths:

There is no doubt about it. The Christian churches (and doubtless other religions) have got themselves into a terrible pickle over human sexuality. The source of the mess is the age old problem of the text. And the human disinclination, in the face of new knowledge, to adjust to the necessities of new thinking.

After twentieth century advances in psychological knowledge were reinforced by the revelations by Alfred Kinsey concerning the relevantly stable and widespread appearance of minority sexual attraction, it became more and more difficult to assert that members of these minorities (mostly homosexuals and bisexuals) were 'evil' people, in a tiny minority, who were 'wickedly' choosing expressions of sexuality 'contrary to the order of nature'.

For them, it appeared, their minority inclinations were (on the contrary) the very expression of *their* nature. Still later research suggested that in some (perhaps many) cases, they were actually the product of genetic hard-wiring, over which the persons concerned had no more choice than they did over their skin and hair colour, eye pigmentation, height, gender and left or right handedness.

These inconvenient truths began to spread throughout the world after the 1950s. What commenced as a trickle of research soon became a wild fire so that now it has spread everywhere. One would have to be living on a remote desert island to be unaware of the proliferating investigations

---

1. One time Justice of the High Court of Australia. Past President of the International Commission of Jurists. Member of the Eminent Persons Group on the Future of the Commonwealth of Nations.

about human sexual variations undertaken by the scientists. They have been intrepid in their pursuit of verities long hidden. And their revelations have been taken up by the subjects of the research themselves: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, and otherwise 'queer' (GLBTIQ)<sup>2</sup> people. And pressed upon everyone who will listen and some who will not. With an energy born out of a repression lately thrown off, just as the prisoners in Beethoven's *Fidelio* threw off their chains as liberation finally arrived.

### Anglican compromise

So what have the Christian Churches done in response to these unpleasant and unwelcome discoveries of science? Well, most of them have prevaricated. A minority have accepted the inevitable and begun to re-think their intellectual and spiritual positions. I am proud to say that many of the Christian leaders who have adopted the latter stance have been Anglicans—the denomination of Christianity in which I was raised: in the sternly Protestant tradition of the Sydney Diocese. That simple faith disclaimed too much ceremony. It found its roots in the revolutionary doctrinal Christianity of Jesus of the manger, and of the Cross. Other Christian denominations have taken a similar stance, particularly some in the non-conformist traditions now gathered in the United or Uniting Churches. Still, other Christian Churches have not been so friendly. They include the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox and the Pentecostal traditions which, for differing reasons, have generally tried to cling onto old beliefs and to cite old Biblical texts in support of doing so.

Bishop Desmond Tutu, one time Anglican Archbishop in South Africa, who had earlier tasted the sting of racial discrimination, has been a valiant defender of the equality and dignity of GLBTIQ people. He has explained that he could no more embrace the hatred and discrimination of Christian brothers and sisters against the sexual minority than he could embrace the racism of apartheid, now overthrown. The Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr Rowan Williams) appeared, at first, to be of a similar mind. Until the practical realities of holding the Anglican flock together was brought home to him at Lambeth, since when he has been struggling to accommodate the irreconcilable tensions in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

---

2. Acronym for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transexual, Intersexual and Queer.

Nevertheless, the issue of adjustment to scientific reality has certainly begun in my denomination. Not all that surprising. From the beginning, Anglicanism has been a branch of Christianity that has had to reconcile itself to internal conflict and disagreement within the one institutional tradition: the Catholic, ceremonial, authoritarian ways of the old church. The sparse, undecorated Protestant, bookish ways of the new. This uneasy dialogue continues. This book is, in a sense, a contribution to that dialogue. It offers intellectual insights into the tradition of internal institutional ambivalence which has so far proved the saving grace of Anglicanism: protecting its adherents from the extreme of the contesting claims of eternal rectitude:

It has been the wisdom of the Church of England, ever since the first compiling of her public Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting, any variation from it. For, as on the one side common experience sheweth, that where a change has been made of things advisedly established (no evident necessity so requiring) sundry inconveniences have thereupon ensued; and those many times more and greater than the evils, that were intended to be remedied by such change: So on the other side, the particular Forms of Divine worship and the Rites and ceremonies appointed to be used therein, being things in their own nature indifferent, and alterable, and so acknowledged; it is but reasonable, that upon weighty and important considerations, according to the various exigencies of times and occasions, such changes and alterations be made therein, as those that are in place of Authority should from time to time seem either necessary or expedient.<sup>3</sup>

And not only in liturgy, but also in the understanding of sacred texts.

---

3. The Preface to the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode Limited, 1662)

## **An unstable resolution**

Of course, the Christian churches (and other beliefs) could simply ignore the instruction and discoveries that science is presenting. They could go on believing that GLBTIQ people (including in the families, friends and neighbours in the congregation) are simply ‘wicked’, or ‘inclined to evil’. They could go on citing the old texts and denouncing those who urge new understandings and new beliefs. They could continue suggesting that these GLBTIQ people are nasty and unnatural types who persist in defying God’s ordinance to pursue their unconventional ‘lifestyle’. How dismissive is that word ‘lifestyle’. Yet it is the word that is constantly used by the Holy See at international conferences, where a most unholy alliance is often forged with the International Islamic Conference in preaching the continuation of the old ways and old beliefs, grounded in the old texts.

So here comes the pickle. Science has made it so intolerable for intelligent leaders of Christian churches that they are finding it more and more difficult to assert that GLBTIQ people are wicked in themselves. In the face of expanding knowledge about variation of sexual orientation, to do this would be as foolish as to preach the inherent wickedness of women; or of left-handed people (although each of these assertions has been tried in the past at various times).

In this way, an unstable compromise has been brought about. It has resulted in the suggestion from important church authorities (including some in Anglicanism and including my own Bishop in Sydney) that adherents to Christianity must not discriminate against people simply because of their sexual orientation. Poor things, they cannot help their warped inclination to ‘evil’ acts. But people of this orientation must be told, kindly but firmly, that they must never ever do anything that follows naturally for them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They must sin, if at all, only in their minds and in their imaginations. And quietly. They must never have lovers with whom they can share acts of physical intimacy. They must never create domestic arrangements of tenderness and love. They must somehow sublimate their feelings in this regard—life long. No act of a sexual kind must ever be allowed. And no faithful, long-term, relationships between them must be recognised. No desire for children must be fulfilled. No family celebration must be permitted. No civil law should be changed to recognise the truth and reality of this minority. Like the black majority in South Africa, they must forever be cast into a kind of sexual apartheid, where their rights are denied and their desires frustrated. This is the command of scripture. It must be obeyed.

I say that this is an 'unstable' instruction for obvious reasons. A desire for sexual expression is part of the powerful hard-wiring of every human being. Celibacy does not come naturally to humans. (It does not come at all to other species). The recent record of so-called celibate religious people has been so disappointing, in so many countries, and so damaging to the churches of Jesus, that one would think that religious people, above all would realise the unreasonable nature of demands for widespread global celibacy. Particularly on the part of a huge number of human beings (say four percent of six billion) who are not inclined by vocation, profession, or immediate necessity to embrace celibacy: the one sexual inclination that Freud was prepared to describe as 'unnatural'.

So, in so far as the Christian denominations recognise GLBTIQ realities but demand celibacy, they, of all people, should appreciate that it is unreasonable, irrational and is just not going to happen. Certainly, it cannot be a permanent solution to the quandary of how to deal with this pesky minority which, now supported by science, lawyers and fellow citizens, is standing up and demanding its rights to human dignity, respect, equality and legal recognition.

### **Responses to the instability**

So what can happen in present circumstances? What is the next step in this international game of chess as the pieces on the board are quickly being moved in radical and surprising ways, undreamt of in earlier generations?

The first response is one which increasing numbers of Australians, and others, are embracing: agnosticism or atheism. Or just plain indifference to the instruction of the Christian churches. Already this was the response that greeted earlier demands addressed to Christian communities by the organised churches in respect of contraception, women's sexuality, *in vitro* fertilisation and other changes brought about with advances of science and modern knowledge. According to the Australian census, the community of non-believers is the fastest growing 'religion' in the Australian nation. When, recently, we filled in our 2011 census form, my partner and I differed as we have long done. He proudly answered 'no religion'. Equally proudly, I affirmed my adherence to Anglican Christianity. Over forty-two years, we have had many constructive discussions on this issue. But neither of us will shift. I have to acknowledge that his beliefs seem to be attracting increasing support in my community. I also must acknowl-

edge a greater understanding of his position than I held when we first met, so many decades ago.

A second response can be described as ‘business as usual’. Stick to the old ways. Change nothing. Rely on traditions stretching back even to the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament and to the holiness code in the Book of Leviticus, as we have understood it. With modest adjustments to recognising the need to discourage actual violence against GLBTIQ people, this has been the most usual response of the Christian churches in the West over the past fifty years. Perhaps it cannot be maintained forever: any more than the long held belief that earth was the centre of the universe; that the sun circled around the earth, not vice versa; that the world was created in six days about 5,000 years ago; and that animals and beasts of the field and birds of the air were ‘things’ put on earth solely for man’s pleasure and use, not sentient beings with feelings of pain and fear to be respected.

Ultimately, Christian people, for the most part, adjusted their thinking and understanding of Scripture to the science taught by Darwin and his scientific successors. But it was a mighty struggle for a time. And in some parts of the world, the struggle goes on. We are still in the midst of the struggle in relation to the science of sexuality. Perhaps we should just leave things to evolve. Where big changes are required, and conservative institutions and personalities are involved, we should not rush things.

However, things are being rushed, to some extent, because there is nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come. Once the scientific truth about sexuality arrived in the human consciousness, like the earlier Darwinian evolution, it could not be suppressed. Good people, including most Christian people, are now beginning to feel very uncomfortable indeed about being nasty towards the ‘lifestyle’ of people whose sexual orientation is different from their own. They are beginning to recognise the need to accept the legitimacy and necessity of human and sexual relations, including for minorities. So long as those minorities are adult, acting by mutual consent and conducting themselves in private, the legitimacy of their conduct is increasingly accepted by others who recognise, in themselves, the needs for, and social utility of, loving and supporting human relationships and being at peace with one’s basic identity. The attributes that bind such relationships together make them strong and socially workable. And ordinary citizens around the world, including churchgoers, are coming to realise this.

So this is where the subject matter of this book comes in. Once it is realised that a (proportionately small, but in numbers very large) group of



people have a sexual orientation different from the majority, a real puzzle is presented to spiritual people. Why would God as the Creator make a significant cohort of people inclined by their natures to 'evil' acts? Why be so perverse as to plant in them an inclination to 'wickedness'? Why, in the face of evidence of their long-term loving and faithful relationships amongst them, would the almighty want to deny happy and loving contact which, objectively, does no harm to anyone? And actually strengthens society and is good for the physical and psychic health of all those concerned?

The realisation of these truths, and of the apparent incompatibility of the past understandings of scriptural texts to the contrary, has led the authors of this book to explore the scriptural sources that are said to stand in the way of a kinder and more inclusive view about sexual variation. Not only do our past understandings appear to conflict with the concept of a universal and loving God. They are also understandings that seem specially out of harmony the New Covenant, with the simple message that Jesus Christ came to teach us all.

## Hermeneutics and law

I am no expert in hermeneutics<sup>4</sup>. But I know enough about legal interpretation of ancient texts to recognise some of the common features that exist in my discipline and in the more ancient discipline of unravelling the meanings of biblical passages.

When I was studying law in Sydney in the 1950s, the tradition of the English law that we learnt was one that generally demanded a literal and verbal interpretation of binding texts. So unrealistic were the outcomes often produced by that approach (especially in the interpretation of enduring documents like national constitutions) that, in the intervening years, a new doctrine began to emerge. It has demanded attention not only to the *text* of words; but also to the *context* in which those words appear; and the *purpose* or *policy* which the words appear to reveal. Increasingly, in the law, we have come to realise that interpretation is an art, not a science. That values are inevitably important considerations for ascertaining meaning. How much more true must this be of Holy Scripture, as of the words of man?

---

4. The art or science of interpretation, especially of Scripture. Commonly distinguished from exegesis or practical exposition. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Thus, the several authors of the chapters of this book have examined, successively the passages in the Book of Genesis and of Leviticus in the Old Testament and the Letters of Paul to the Romans and to Timothy in the New Testament, which together provide the textual foundations for the worldwide animosity and even hatred towards sexual minorities. These essays are understandable to me because they approach the tasks in hand in ways that seem more consonant with the developments of approaches to interpretation that we now follow in courts of law throughout the English-speaking world. The old literalists are, largely, dying off. Though some of them remain to do mischief in the law, as certainly they still do in Scripture.

I do not really regard these chapters as ‘Uneasy Pieces’. I regard them as full of ease and grace. We should feel uneasy about the translation of words that causes cruelty and unkindness to vulnerable minorities. Surely we have learned enough in the last century about the error of those approaches to Scripture: including the source in St Matthew’s Gospel which was the textual origin of the anti-Semitism, that fuelled the hatred of the Jews in Hitler’s Germany.<sup>5</sup>

### **Eyes to see and ears to hear**

The journey we are taking in this matter will not be completed quickly. It is a long journey because it comes after long held earlier understandings about the direction that we should take. But science today requires us to rethink the past Christian position. The essays in this book afford new light on how this may be done, with the legitimacy, integrity and the authenticity of true scholarship.

For those who contribute to this new enlightenment, in harmony with at least this Anglican’s understanding of the New Covenant, I express thanks. I hope that this little book will be sent to bishops and archbishops and others of the Faithful in the Anglican Communion everywhere. And to those others too who have eyes to see and ears to hear the message of kindness and inclusiveness that lie at the very centre of this spiritual endeavour.

Michael Kirby  
Sydney  
1 October 2011

---

5. Matthew, 27:25: ‘Then answered all the people [the Jews] and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.’



# Five Uneasy Pieces

## Essays on Scripture and Sexuality

*"The 'uneasy pieces' of this book are well-written, challenging and stimulating. They come from the pens of Australian biblical scholars within the Anglican communion, who are skilled in both exegesis and hermeneutical theory. Each essay addresses the question of homosexuality in the Bible, looking at passages in the Old Testament and the New Testament which are often used as a basis for rejecting homosexuality in Christian ethics. Each essay argues, on the contrary, that there is no biblical warrant for condemning either a homosexual orientation or a faithful and committed homosexual relationship. The book, as a whole, makes it crystal clear that both sides of the debate take seriously the Bible as the inspired word of God, and both are seeking to discern the Scriptures in order to hear God's voice speaking to us today."*

**Dorothy A. Lee**

Dean of Trinity College Theological School, Melbourne

*"I do not regard these chapters as 'Uneasy Pieces'. I regard them as full of ease and grace. We should feel uneasy about translation of words that bring cruelty and unkindness to vulnerable minorities."*

**Hon Michael Kirby, AC CMG**

Former Justice of the High Court of Australia, 1996-2009

*"These Five Uneasy Pieces are uneasy as to the topic they canvass: the handful of Biblical texts which are most often used to pronounce on the wrongness of homosexual activity. They demand a lot of the reader, calling us into serious textual study of Biblical material from Levitical proscriptions to Pauline vice lists. They are honest, naming the social and theological complexities of the worlds in which the Biblical texts were written and are now read. And they are hopeful, showing Anglicans how disciplined reading of the Bible on the subject of human sexuality can be liberating for both straight and gay Christians who want to live together with a spirit of generosity in the 21st century Church."*

*Read this book in a group, with conversation partners, taking your time with the complex and fascinating material. The five pieces may be uneasy, but they will be very rewarding.*

**The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth J. Smith**

Anglican Diocese of Perth



[www.atfpress.com](http://www.atfpress.com)

ISBN 9781921817243



9 781921 817243 >