

A Response from Joseph D. Galgalo*

The debate about the place of same-sex relationships in the life of the church has continued to occupy the churches of the Anglican Communion for some time now. Over the years, many different studies on the subject have appeared, but none has attempted the comprehensive study offered by these papers. The deliberate format of this work sets it apart as unique and extremely valuable, with two distinct theological views on the subject set side by side and allowed to engage in the most candid and helpful manner.

It must be admitted that not much actual new argument or fresh points of view may be said to advance any side of the debate further than we already have come. Such arguments and different positions, are, however, brought into sharp focus with brilliant clarity, and with neither side shying from the real bone of contention: the teaching of Scripture on the matter at hand. To their credit, both sides take Scripture seriously and thoroughly and explore what guidance can be gleaned from the biblical texts on the subject of same-sex relationships. In this regard, each group (the traditionalists and the liberals, as referred to in the study) delve deeply into biblical exegesis, an understanding of Christian marriage, and the more difficult matter of the authority of Scripture. The reader is put into a difficult position, for neutrality in judging which of these two irreconcilable views may be right is impossible, especially with regard to which is the more plausible interpretation of the biblical data.

The vantage point of the traditionalists is absolutely clear. Scripture is taken as the “key resource and final norm” (p. 24). The group’s approach is determined by reflection on the matter in light of God’s revelation in Scripture, while also taking a serious account of reason by natural law, a traditional understanding of sexual ethics, and scientific evidence. Their strongest point is perhaps that the contention simply cannot be settled by consensus, untenable exegesis, or flawed theological arguments based on changes in society. The group offers a

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thorough, patient, detailed, and traditionally amiable exegesis of relevant texts and passages of Scripture.

In doing this, they attain a commendable “hermeneutical integrity” in recognizing the authorial intention and general spirit of the teaching of Scripture on the matter of same-sex sexual relationships. They conclude that same-sex relationships cannot be justified without radically redefining and altering the institution of marriage itself and unless scriptural teachings on the same are put aside or adopted using an ingenious reinterpretation. In this light, they recommend that the only option for those who for whatever reason cannot enter into holy matrimony, open exclusively to heterosexual couples, is “learning to refuse to indulge sexual urges” as “part of the general spiritual discipline” and “the way of the cross” (p. 46).

The liberals begin exactly from where the traditionalists left off. Celibacy, they argue, is a special calling and cannot be imposed on persons who are not called to chastity. They undertake a brave and a robust defense of same-sex sexual relationships. The reader cannot help but admire the intellectually stimulating and for the most part intriguing anthropological and theological insights that these arguments afford. Yet, there are problems with the way this group goes about the task. The implicit framework that the mission of the church informs Scripture and not the other way round is the key problem, in my view. The approach is heuristic and the premise that “we are following the leading of the Spirit” is ambiguous, not least in the absence of a clear scriptural reference, received tradition, or even a new revelation that holds visible continuity with the old, against which the claim could be verified.

Oddly, one of the strengths of this group’s argument is also one of its weaknesses. Much of the argument pays close attention to Scripture, or at least some carefully selected texts. A good deal of space is dedicated to onerous exegetical analysis of these texts with an intention to prove that same-sex relationships are not contrary to Scripture. With such devotion to considering biblical references as a basis for judgments, one would expect a particular consideration of certain passages of direct relevance. Instead, it is the lack of reference to such passages that arouses curiosity (for example, 1 Corinthians 6), or the refusal to see the obvious in the Genesis and Ephesians passages, which form the core of their argument. Because of this, there are several places where a significant conclusion is made without clear

evidence. The doctrines of incarnation, Eucharist, and atonement are, for example, seen as affirming the body in every sense, simply on the basis that each refers to the body. Such conclusions can only be based on assumption; that considerably weakens the argument.

Further, a number of parallels and typologies based on unclear assumptions turn out to be somewhat confused. The grafting of Gentiles and extending the sacrament of marriage to same-sex partners is one such parallel. Agreed that the kingdom of God is open to all, what the argument fails to address is how to handle (with regard to homosexuals) the demand Scripture places upon Gentiles who, on believing, accept being grafted. In addition, the strong connection that is made between marriage and sanctification is basically flawed. First, the *Book of Common Prayer* is put to a service for which it was never intended. To assert that same-sex couples require the sacrament of marriage for the same purpose as heterosexual couples cannot be supported unless we first acknowledge that what is proposed fundamentally changes the meaning of marriage. Second, the key difficulty lies with the assumption that homosexuals need marriage for the purpose of sanctification. On the contrary, the general spirit of Scripture seems to hold that any believer, regardless of marital status, is sanctified by the Spirit. Sanctification, as *ordo salutis*, does not need marriage. Theological difficulties aside, the connection unfortunately also implies that singleness and celibacy cannot be pursued without jeopardizing one's own sanctification.

Whether or not one finally agree with the conclusions of one or the other of these groups, one must applaud their painstaking study, a treasure beyond compare, and a valuable gift to the Anglican Communion and the universal church of Christ. In particular, one must acknowledge the sentiment that this difficult matter cannot be settled without reference to Scripture, regardless of how our interpretations of the same may differ. While we cannot afford to ignore or run away from our contextual and cultural realities, and where such should be addressed with all sincerity and the seriousness it deserves, recourse to a conscientious interrogation of the biblical texts and of their relevance and authority for today is imperative.

