

# **A 'NO' TO SAME-SEX UNIONS**

***James I. Packer***

**60p**



**Fellowship of Word and Spirit**

Biblical Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
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**FILE 5**

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## Foreword

Some may question why FWS have chosen to publish another booklet on the subject of homosexuality. In the following paragraphs I wish to defend this decision and encourage the reader to take this issue seriously.

First, when I wrote *Conduct Which Honours God?* (Orthos 14, 1995) I concluded that the issue of homosexuality would be the defining issue for *evangelicals* in the coming years. In part, this is because some evangelicals, such as the late Michael Vasey, have suggested that there may be a place for what has been called 'covenanted same-sex relationships', in which same-sex sexual acts may be the appropriate expression of that same-sex desire.

Secondly, the pressure from the world on this issue is intense. Any opposition to same-sex sexual relationships is automatically branded as 'homophobic'. We need all the scriptural help we can to understand and apply the Bible to contemporary issues.

Thirdly, the Anglican Communion is still trying to make sense of the implications of the controversial decisions which have been made in this regard by the diocese of New Westminster. It has often been observed that the issues which are hotly debated on the other side of the Atlantic, soon become the agenda here.

Fourthly, our new Archbishop, Dr Rowan Williams, has spoken and written clearly on this issue (see *The Way Forward*, ed. Timothy Bradshaw, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997, as the most easily readable introduction to his views). Whilst he has stated that he will keep his private views private, he has made it clear that he believes that the Church of England needs to rethink the conclusions of *Issues in Human Sexuality* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991). For sure, that document arrived at a rather confusing double standard, in which homosexual acts are not always inappropriate for lay people but are deemed to be so for the clergy. But, whilst Dr Williams may not pursue

a revision of this document himself, it is clear that this issue will be on the General Synod agenda in the near future.

Fifthly, we are especially grateful for the clarity of the article by Dr Packer, which follows. Much writing on this subject is rather technical and obscure. We are grateful that he has given us permission to reprint this article, and we have tried to do this cheaply, so that it may be widely disseminated and read by lay and ordained alike. I hope that you will purchase copies in bulk in order that your PCC/eldership/congregation members will have a copy in their hands.

I warmly commend it to you for a wide distribution.

The Revd Dr Simon Vibert  
Chairman, Fellowship of Word and Spirit

## A 'no' to same-sex unions

In June 2002, the synod of the Anglican diocese of New Westminster, in which Vancouver stands, mandated its bishop to do what he had already indicated his wish to do, namely, to authorize the production of a liturgical form for blessing same-sex unions, to be used in any parish of the diocese that requests it.

A number of synod members walked out as the most forceful way of protesting the decision; they declared themselves out of communion with the bishop and the synod, and appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury and other Anglican primates and bishops for help. As one who walked, I have been asked why I regard this decision, with which, to be sure, I disagree, as important enough to justify the extreme action that I, with others, took. I write now to answer this question.

### Why I walked out

In one sentence my answer is: because this decision, taken in its context, falsifies the gospel of Christ, abandons the authority of Scripture, jeopardizes the salvation of fellow human beings, and betrays the church in its God-appointed role as the bastion and bulwark of divine truth.

On what authority do I say that? On my own, as a Christian, a minister and a theologian? No, not at all. On that of the Lambeth Conference, the periodic gathering of all Anglican bishops, the body with more moral authority in the Communion than any other, which in 1998 actually affirmed all that I have just said? No, at least not primarily. My primary authority is a Bible writer named Paul, about whom, for many decades now, I have asked myself at every turn of my theological road, would Paul be with me in this? What would he say if he were in my shoes? For the record, I have never dared, and I never would dare, to offer a view on anything that I did not have good reason to think he would endorse.

But who is Paul? Many would at once say: 'Paul is not Christ', as if there might be a doctrinal difference between them, and it is true that during the past two centuries there has been a great deal of what, academically speaking, I would call careless talk along these lines by revisionist Protestants, lapsed Christians and declared anti-Christians. But wait a minute. What are the facts?

Paul, the passionate persecutor whom Christ converted on the Damascus road, preached, taught, pastored and wrote his letters as Christ's apostle, one of the little band of Jesus' personal emissaries and representatives, messengers of the living Lord charged to relay to a needy world the revelation they had received. Paul was very conscious of this delegated authority as well as of the authority of the revealed truth entrusted to him (see, for instance, Ephesians 3:1-5; 2 Timothy 1:8-14). So in 1 Corinthians, a letter to a church where his teaching authority was challenged, he writes: 'Now we have received ... the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words ... taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual' (2:12-13, ESV).

I, too, have the Spirit

Then, having given his judgement on a pastoral question on which 'I have command from the Lord' — no dictum from Jesus' own lips to quote (7:25) — he adds, with irony: 'And I think that I too' — as much as any of you, who are so confident of being Spirit-taught — 'have the Spirit of God' (verse 40). Finally, having again used his pastoral judgement to give rules and restrictions for church worship at Corinth, and clearly aware that he was reining in some established disorders, he expostulates: 'Was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord' (14:36-37, ESV).

J.B. Phillips's paraphrase makes Paul's sense vivid: 'If any of your number thinks himself a true preacher and a spiritually-minded man, let him recognize that what I have written is by divine command!' How so? Not because Paul is citing something Jesus said in the days of his

flesh, but because the apostles are taught and enabled by the Holy Spirit to speak the mind of Jesus — to speak in his name, as Paul puts it (2 Thessalonians 3:6, etc.) — just as Old Testament prophets were empowered to utter the given oracles of Yahweh. Paul rated what he taught as the given word of Christ, and this is a fact to be faced.

Now in 1 Corinthians we find the following, addressed it seems, to exponents of some kind of antinomian spirituality: 'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, not idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God' (6:9-11, ESV).

To make sure we grasp what Paul is saying here, I pose some questions.

First question: what is Paul talking about in this vice list? Answer: lifestyles, regular behaviour patterns, habits of mind and action. He has in view not single lapses followed by repentance, forgiveness and greater watchfulness, with God's help against recurrence, but ways of life in which some of his readers were set, believing that for Christians there was no harm in them.

Second question: what is Paul saying about these habits? Answer: they are ways of sin, which, if not repented of and forsaken, will keep people out of God's kingdom of salvation. Clearly, self-indulgence and self-service (I borrow the phrase from the gas stations), free from self-discipline and self-denial, is the attitude they express and a lack of moral discernment at their heart.

Third question: what is Paul saying about homosexuality? Answer: the practice of same-sex physical connection for orgasm, on the model of heterosexual intercourse, should be eschewed by those who claim to be Christ's. Paul's phrase 'men who practise homosexuality' covers two Greek words for the parties involved in these acts. The first,

*arsenokoitai*, means literally, male-bedders, which seems clear enough. The second, *malakoi*, is used in many connections to mean unmanly, womanish and effeminate, and here refers to males matching the woman's part in physical sex. In this context, where two terms for sexual misbehaviour have already been used, there is really no doubt as to what Paul has in mind. He must have known, as Christians today know, that some males are sexually drawn to men rather than women, but he is not speaking of inclination, only of behaviour — what has more recently been called 'acting out'. His point is that these urges need to be resisted, since acting them out cannot please God and will reveal lethal impenitence. Romans 1:26 shows that Paul would have spoken similarly about lesbian acting out, had he had reason to mention it here.

Fourth question: what is Paul saying about the gospel? Answer: those who, as lost sinners, cast themselves in genuine faith on the Christ of the gospel, and so receive the Holy Spirit, as all Christians do (see Galatians 3:2), find transformation through the transaction: cleansing of conscience (the washing of forgiveness), acceptance with God (justification), and strength to resist and not act out the particular temptation they experience (sanctification). A preacher friend sought to get his congregation's attention by declaring: 'I want you to know that I am a non-practising adulterer'. (I am told he got what he sought — I do not wonder.) With some of the Corinthian Christians, he was celebrating the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in heterosexual terms; with others of the Corinthians, today's homosexuals are called to prove, live out, and celebrate the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in homosexual terms. Another friend, well-known to me for 30 years, has lived with homosexual desires all his adult life, but remains a faithful husband and father, homosexually-chaste through the power of the Holy Spirit, according to the gospel; a model in every way.<sup>1</sup> We are all sexually tempted, one way or another, yet we may all tread the path of chastity through the Spirit's enablement, and thereby please God.

As one who assumes the full seriousness and sincerity of all who take part in today's debates among Christians regarding homosexuality, both in New Westminster and elsewhere, I now must ask: how can

anyone miss the force of what Paul says here? There are, I think, two ways in which this happens.

### First way

One way, the easier one to deal with, is the way of special exegesis: I mean interpretations that, however possible, are artificial, and not natural, but that allow one to say: 'What Paul is condemning is not my sort of same-sex union'. Whether a line of interpretation is artificial, so constituting misinterpretation, is, I grant, a matter of personal judgement. However, I do not know how any reasonable person, let alone any scholar, could read Robert A.J. Gagnon's new 500-page book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*<sup>2</sup>, an encyclopaedic examination of all the relevant passages and all the exegetical hypotheses concerning them that are on offer, and not conclude that any exegesis that evades the above understanding of Paul is evasive indeed. Nor from now on can I regard anyone as qualified to debate homosexuality who has not come to terms with Gagnon. I have not always agreed with James Barr, but when on the dust jacket he describes Gagnon's treatise as 'indispensable even for those who disagree with the author', I think he is absolutely right.

### Second way

The second way, which is harder to engage with, is the way of letting experience judge the Bible. Some moderns, backed by propaganda from gay campaigners for homosexual equality (a civil rights issue that has made headlines in Britain, North America and Australasia for 40 years now) and by solidarity in the gay community to which many of them belong, and with hearts possessed by the pseudo-Freudian myth that you can hardly be a healthy human without active sexual expression, feel entitled to say: 'Gay is us; our experience is — in other words, we feel — that gay unions are good; so Bible prohibitions of gay behaviour must be wrong.'

The natural response is that the Bible is meant to judge our experience rather than the other way round, and that feelings of sexual arousal and attraction, generating a sense of huge significance and need for

release in action as they do, cannot be trusted as either a path to wise living or a guide to biblical interpretation. Rhyming the point to make what in my youth was called a 'groom', the fact to face is that the sweet bright fire/of sexual desire/is a dreadful liar. But more must be said than that. At issue here is a Grand Canyon-wide difference about the nature of the Bible and the way it conveys God's message to modern readers. Two positions challenge each other.

One is the historic Christian belief that through the prophets, the incarnate Son, the apostles and the writers of canonical Scripture as a body, God has used human language to tell us definitively and transculturally about his way, his works, his will and his worship, and that this revealed truth is grasped by letting the Bible interpret itself to us from within, in the knowledge that the way into God's mind is through that of the writers, that it is through them that the Holy Spirit who inspired them teaches the church, and that one mark of sound biblical insights is that they do not run counter to anything else in the canon.

This is the position of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, and of evangelicals and other conservative Protestants. There are differences on the place of the church in the interpretative process, but all agree that the process itself is essentially as described. I call this the objectivist position.

The second view applies to Christianity the Enlightenment's trust in human reason, along with the fashionable evolutionary assumption that the present is wiser than the past; so it concludes that the world has the wisdom, and the church must play intellectual catch-up in each generation in order to survive. From this standpoint, everything in the Bible becomes relative to society's ongoing development (nothing stands still), and the Holy Spirit's teaching ministry is to help the faithful see where Bible doctrine shows the cultural limitations of the ancient world and needs adjustment in light of latter-day experience (encounters, interactions, perplexities, states of mind and emotion, and so on). Same-sex unions are one example. As stated, this view is scarcely 50 years old, though its antecedents go back much further: Spong and Holloway are among its big names, and it has a large

following among leaders in the Anglican Church of Canada. I call it the subjectivist position.

In the New Westminster debate, subjectivists are found saying that what is at issue is not the authority of Scripture, but its interpretation. I do not question the sincerity of those who say this, but I have doubts about their clear-headedness. As the above analysis shows, the subjectivist way of affirming the authority of Scripture as the source of the teachings that now need to be adjusted, is precisely a denying of it from the objectivist point of view, and clarity requires us to say so. The relative authority of ancient religious expertise, now to be revamped in our post-Christian, multi-faith, evolving Western world, and the absolute authority of God's unchanging utterances, set before us to be learned, believed, and obeyed as the mainstream church has always done, never mind what the world thinks, are two different things; and what are represented as different interpretations are, in fact, reflections of the way in which on the one view the doctrinal and moral teaching of Scripture is always final and definitive for Christian people, while on the other view it never is. What is definitive for the exponents of that view is not what the Bible says, as such, but what their own minds come up with as they seek to make Bible teaching match the wisdom of the world. Where early liberal theologians saw themselves as modifying details of the historic understanding of Scripture, by watering down inspiration and reformulating the doctrines of the creed in an up-to-date way, their successors have given up the historic frame of understanding altogether so as to keep pace with the current cultural relativism of Western thought-leaders.

Each view of biblical authority sees the other as false and disastrous at this time, and is sure that the long-term welfare of Christianity requires that the other view be given up and left behind as quickly as possible. The ongoing conflict between them, which breaks surface in the disagreement about same-sex unions, is a fight to the death, in which both sides are sure that they have the church's best interests at heart. It is most misleading, indeed crass, to call this disagreement simply a difference about interpretation, of the kind for which Anglican comprehensiveness has always sought to make room.

Let me pull the threads together. (Remember, this is a personal statement.) Why do I think the New Westminster decision had to be protested as was done, and that the protest must be maintained in every possible way? My answer, at the end of the day, is for two reasons, the first of which subdivides.

1) Major spiritual issues are involved: the authority of the Bible, the terms of the gospel and the conditions of personal salvation.

To bless same-sex unions liturgically is to ask God to bless them and to enrich those who join in them, as is done in marriage ceremonies. This assumes that the relationship, of which the physical bond is an integral part, is intrinsically good and thus, if I may coin a word, blessable, as procreative sexual intercourse within heterosexual marriage is. About this assumption there are three things to say.

First, it entails deviation from the biblical gospel and the historic Christian creed. It distorts the doctrines of creation and sin, claiming that the gay condition is good since gay people are made that way, and rejecting the idea that homosexual inclinations are a spiritual disorder, one more sign and fruit of original sin in some people's moral system. It also distorts the doctrines of regeneration and sanctification, rating same-sex union a Christian relationship and so affirming what the Bible would call salvation in sin rather than from it.

Second, it threatens destruction to my neighbour. The official proposal said it was expected that persons requesting this blessing from a minister who, like me, was unwilling to give it, would be referred by him to a minister who was willing to give it. Would that be pastoral care? Should I not try to help gay people to leave their lifestyle, rather than so act as to anchor them in it? Should I not try to help them to the practice of homosexual chastity, just as I try to help restless singles and divorcees to the practice of heterosexual chastity? Do I not want to see them all in the kingdom of God?

Third, it involves the delusion of looking to God — actually asking him — to sanctify sin by blessing what he condemns. This is irresponsible, irreverent, indeed blasphemous, and utterly unacceptable as church

policy. How could I do it? How could you? How could anyone who had not first mentally refashioned God in their own image — and how dare any of us do that?

2) A major change in Anglicanism is involved: writing into a diocesan constitution something that Scripture, canonically interpreted, clearly and unambiguously rejects as sin. This has never been done before and ought not to be done now.

All the written standards of post-Reformation Anglicanism have been intentionally biblical and catholic — biblical in terms of the historic view of the nature and authority of Scripture, and catholic in terms of the historic consensus of the mainstream church — whatever individual eccentricities and variations may have been tolerated in practice. That there have been many such is well known, but that is not the point here. The recent controversial decisions to remarry the divorced and make women presbyters arguably had biblical warrant, though minorities disputed this. In biblical and catholical terms, however, the New Westminster decision writes legitimization of sin into the diocese's constitutional standards and categorises the tolerated abstainers as the awkward squad of eccentrics rather than the mainstream Anglicans that they were before. It is thus a decision that can only be justified in terms of the biblical relativism described earlier, the novel notion of biblical authority which, to my mind, is a cuckoo in the Anglican nest and a heresy in its own right. It is a watershed decision for world Anglicanism, for it changes the nature of Anglicanism itself. It has to be reversed. Luther's response at Worms, when asked to recant all his writings, echoes in my memory, as it has done for more than 50 years: 'Unless you prove to me by Scripture and plain reason that I am wrong, I cannot and will not recant. My conscience is captive to the word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe (i.e. it endangers the soul). Here I stand. There is nothing else I can do. God help me. Amen.'

Conscience is that power of the mind over which we have no power, which binds us to believe what we see to be true and do what we see to be right. Captivity of conscience to the word of God, that is, to the absolutes of God's authoritative teaching in the Bible, is integral to

authentic Christianity. Luther knew it, and so, thank God, do I. More words from Luther come to mind: 'If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point that the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages fiercely is where the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is merely flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.'

Was the protest in order? Was 'no' the right way to vote? Did faithfulness to Christ and faithful confession of Christ, require it? It seems so. Then the present task is to stand fast, to watch, pray and fight for better things: for the true authority of the Bible, for the 'true truth' of the gospel (I echo Francis Schaeffer's phrase for the factuality and finality of the biblical Christ), and for the salvation of gay people for whom I care. One could walk away from the diocese, or one could continue to stand in it without fighting, or one can stand and fight. May God help those of us who for conscience's sake choose that third option.

*The above article is an amplified version of an address given by James Packer at a church meeting.*

The Revd Professor James Packer is emeritus professor of systematic theology at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada.

## Notes

1. See Jonathan Mills, *Love, Covenant and Meaning* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1998), stating the case for marriage and paternity rather than enforced celibacy both homosexual and heterosexual, as the preferred option for those with homosexual inclinations.

2. Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001); see also William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2001).

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