

A critique from Headway (Ireland) of the Methodist booklet on Sexuality.

Introduction

Headway (Ireland) recognises that the issue of human sexuality is a 'live' debate that needs expression within the life of the Methodist Church. This well-produced booklet provides a conversation-starter which is designed to help us to listen to one another and avoid entrenched positions. However, in seeking to do this, the booklet does not provide the necessary information upon which to base these conversations. Traditionally, Methodism has upheld the principle that Scripture is the inspired Word of God and the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct. Thus, in seeking to hear what the Spirit is saying to our church about this issue, we must recognise that the Spirit is truth and will not contradict the Word. We question that it took until Page 19 before Scripture is mentioned, because in seeking the will of God, His Word is of primary importance. Any downgrading of Scripture is alarming.

We acknowledge that the working party have produced study materials which are available online. However, in terms of the printed document, (which is the one church members have in their hands) it certainly would have been more helpful and useful to congregations if Bible passages relating to sexuality were listed, to enable an understanding of the counsel of God in both Testaments.

In a post-truth culture, the authority of the Bible is being questioned, or worse, ignored. The discussion about human sexuality is basically about our acceptance or otherwise of the teaching of the Bible. Evangelical Christians welcome the general wisdom gained from biology, psychology and sociology and look beyond them to God's specially revealed truth. Jesus in (John 17v17) prayed for the church: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." Martin Luther stated "My conscience is captive to the word of God" and John Wesley encouraged us not to depart from the "the plain sense of Scripture." Indeed one of the most useful paragraphs in the booklet is page 27 in appendix 2 which was the Council on Social Responsibility report 2011:

"The Rule of Faith of the Methodist Church in Ireland is the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments. Based on this understanding Methodists are inclusive Christians. We therefore believe that God loves everyone and Jesus died for all. We teach that people are made in the image of God but our lives have been tainted by sin; that sin has spoiled God's original intention for us and that sin affects every aspect of our lives, including our sexuality. However, we also emphasise that God's Grace is available to all and from the moment people respond to Jesus in faith, the Holy Spirit begins the process of sanctification: i.e. enables us to grow in grace."

Specific Comments

Page 5. – the use of a verse of a hymn, rather than Scripture sets the wrong context for authority.

Page 8. In the counter-cultural tradition of prophets, Christ's teaching was and is controversial and inconvenient, challenging the prevailing spirit of the age. "Healthy ways of expressing" sexuality are important but the Church is also concerned with the morality of it.

Page 9. It is helpful to note the changing face of social context and culture, however, our task is not to amend what we believe, but to seek ways of relevantly communicating the unchanging truth of God to a shifting world. It is also helpful to note that particularly in John's Gospel, the 'world' is essentially against the Kingdom of God. We should also recognise that the Roman culture of sexuality was not overly different in its liberality from today.

Page 12. The question is raised as to "whether a Christian theology of marriage can or should embrace a relationship between two people of the same sex." It would have been helpful at this stage in the document to indicate that such a re-definition of marriage would be contrary to the 2000 years tradition of the Church and a denial of the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 19 v5). The Lord Jesus Christ repeated Old Testament teaching that marriage is between one man and one woman. This is a core belief for evangelicals and is a matter on which bible-believing Christians cannot agree to disagree.

Page 12,13. The sexualisation of western culture is proving to be destructive. This in itself, should remind us of the wisdom of God's Word and the boundaries of sexual expression that enable life-giving sexual expression.

Page 14. The document gives definitions of: sex; gender; sexuality; sexual activity. This is helpful.

Page 15, 16. Already in the document, and twice here, we meet the phrase “traditional teaching.” This really needed expansion. Again, the implication is that tradition changes. However we again affirm that the Word of the Lord endures forever. Our marriage services include the Bible reading from Mark 10 v 6-9 where Jesus affirms the binary nature of humans and also the heterosexual nature of marriage.

Page 15, 16. The pastoral context is sympathetically noted and is followed up in appendix 2 (page 27). Christians are called to be inclusive and compassionate and we would be the first to repent, and to call for repentance, where this has not been the case. In conversations, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour need to be distinguished from each other. Another publication “Methodist Belief” states:

“In keeping with New Testament teaching, we are opposed to all debased forms of sexuality and sexual practice, whether heterosexual or homosexual. However, we plead for understanding and tolerance for those whose sexual orientation is towards those of their own gender.” (Faith and Order booklet)

This is a proper call to both truth and love which are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, Christians are called to the loving inclusion of people irrespective of our sexuality, while on the other hand, a sinful lifestyle, whether homosexual or heterosexual is condemned throughout Scripture (Romans 6v12). Love and truth are inseparable because God is love (1 John 3 v18; 4 v8) and God is truth (John 4 v24; 14 v6). Charles Wesley knew this and addressed God as: “Thou God of truth and love.” What God has joined together let no one put asunder!

Page 17. We accept that there should be listening, and conversation among all those in our churches regarding human sexuality. However, the booklet’s disparagement of debate reflects a post-truth fashion. Doubtless, the conversation on sexuality will boil down to a debate about the authority of Scripture. This discussion should not be about reaching a consensus, to agreeing to disagree; rather it should be seeking clarity as to the will of God as revealed in Scripture. The Spirit will lead us into truth if we are willing to cooperate with Him. Is the Church subject to Scripture or vice-versa? It cannot be a “both-and.” We must beware of waiting to see where the tide of popular opinion will take the Church lest we be seen on “the wrong side of history.” Jesus says “Follow me.” He does not say “I will follow you!”

Page 19. The question is posed: “How do we deal with Scripture?”, as if Scripture is a difficulty to be got around! The issue must be “How do we submit to Scripture?” It is imprecise to write: “We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the biblical books, and that the same Spirit inspires those who read those books in new situations.” The two uses of the same verb “inspire” make for theological confusion. We distinguish between “inspire” and “enlighten.” In special revelation, God’s Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Bible while today the minds of the readers are enlightened by the same Holy Spirit. The inspiration (2 Timothy 3 v16) as originally given is authoritative, unique and final, while the enlightenment graciously continues. We build on sand when we disrespect the word of God.

Page 20. There is loose talk here saying that “many within the MCI would argue...that the Church should look again at its reading of Scripture and be prepared to change its teaching on the basis of fresh interpretation and a different context.” This seems like a spin which should have been edited out. How many is “many?” It promotes the false idea that how we read Scripture becomes the authority for our teaching rather than the actual, given words of Holy Scripture in their context.

Conclusion

This discussion booklet disappoints in places and alerts us to the danger that people can see their combined wisdom and experience as being on a par with the revealed Word of God. Christian disciples, by nature, are subject to divine authority, under the Lordship of Christ. So the issue of human sexuality boils down to the question: “where do we place our belief and trust?” The changing secular world is influencing the church in competition with God’s word. Let us pray that we shall be a people who are led by the Holy Spirit into truth and love.

(This critique is issued in October 2017 by Headway (Ireland) –Methodist Evangelicals Together. On our website, www.headwayireland.com, the written resource from M. Duncan or his audio tape under events, are useful in the discussion about sexuality. We also commend the “Affirmations” of Evangelical Alliance on the matter of sexuality.)