



Rev. Dr. Bob Robinson

## Worth Reading

**This edition of ‘Worth Reading’ focuses on background resources for the present Anglican sexuality debates. In particular it suggests alternatives to the regrettably unrepresentative and one-sided bibliography at the end of the ‘A Way Forward’ document currently circulating.**

We begin with two accessible sources that offer a thorough analysis of the central issues from a biblical and theological perspective that is in harmony with the Great Tradition of Christian faith.

Begin by googling<sup>1</sup> a fifty page article titled ‘Same-Sex Marriage and Anglican Theology: A View from the Traditionalists’ in *Anglican Theological Review* 93. 1 (Winter 2011): 1-50. The article, by four well-informed and orthodox Anglican / Episcopalian North American scholars, begins with a balanced discussion of ‘*The Social and Ecclesiastical Context*’ pointing out that “A major problem for liberals in the West has been the negative response to [their] innovations on homosexuality from Anglicans in the global South.” The paper then moves on carefully and persuasively to consider ‘*The Witness of Scripture*’ and declares a “strong reluctance to set aside what we consider Scripture’s direct meaning may well be the single most important factor in the opposition of Anglican conservatives to the acceptance of same-sex marriage” – while disavowing the accusations of fundamentalism and homophobia that are “often used to silence or even demonize those who do not agree with same-sex marriage and the concerns of the gay and lesbian community.” This is followed by scholarly discussions of ‘*Discerning the Sexual Patterns in Creation*,’ ‘*The Theological Use of Science and Natural Law*,’ ‘*Homosexuality and Science*’ and a carefully nuanced assessment of ‘*The Possibility of Change in Orientation*.’ The article anticipates and fairly represents the arguments of the revisionists (with a degree of balance this writer doesn’t find in the Way Forward material) before comprehensively and persuasively countering them. This reviewer cannot recommend any single source more highly than this one.

A second major resource has to be the work of the Presbyterian New Testament scholar Robert Gagnon – not only as found in his large (520 page) *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon Press, 2001); and

his *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (co-authored with Dan Via; Fortress Press, 2003) but also at his website [www.robgagnon.net/](http://www.robgagnon.net/) in which he constantly interacts with the continuing debates. The website has a good range of videoed presentations and debates by Gagnon (including at least one that specifically interacts with Anglican discussions).

As well as the above, the following are also recommended:

Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem* (IVP, 2015). Shaw is both acutely conscious of his own feelings of same-sex attraction, and also committed to what biblical authority and Christian convictions affirm about marriage and sex. In this honest and engaging book, subtitled ‘The Church and Same-Sex Attraction,’ Ed Shaw discloses his pain in dealing with same-sex issues; and yet he is equally convinced that gospel obedience is ultimately the only way to experience life in its God-given fullness. He also shows that the Bible’s teaching can seem unreasonable – not simply because of its inherent difficulties, but because of ‘missteps’ that the church has, intentionally or unintentionally, often taken in its understanding of the Christian life. These missteps, Shaw argues, make biblical teaching on sexuality often seem *implausible* (hence the book’s title) and this means that simply defending that teaching is not enough. In other words, we have been shaped by the world around us, and urgently need to re-examine the values that drive our discipleship. Current debates about sexuality should, Shaw argues, also pose searching questions about whether our churches want to be inclusive families that teach and embody a gospel that defines our identity first and foremost in Christ and not in terms of sexuality. Two appendices conclude the book: some twenty pages on ‘The plausibility of the traditional interpretation of Scripture,’ and ten pages on ‘The implausibility of the new interpretations of Scripture.’ The book has clearly met a need in Britain: its first (and

<sup>1</sup> If googling of this or other resources mentioned fails, email [bobr@netaccess.co.nz](mailto:bobr@netaccess.co.nz) for a copy

quite large) printing sold out quickly; reading it will provide some readers with their first example of fellow Christians who are candid about living with same-sex attraction but who also refuse to let their bodily hormones trump their biblical hermeneutics.

Alexander R. Pruss, *One Body* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) offers a heavy-weight philosophical-theological reflection on the nature of love, sexuality and marriage; its subtitle is 'An essay in Christian sexual ethics.' Pruss is a Canadian philosopher who analyses the different forms of love (especially romantic love), the nature of marriage, the precise connection between love, sex, and commitment, and related moral issues. A philosophical colleague from Princeton University says that the book is "quite simply the best work on Christian sexual ethics that I have seen." The fundamental confusion over sexual ethics in the *Way Forward* material, not to mention its lightweight theology, could be clarified by the material in this challenging and rewarding volume.

Alex Tylee, *Walking with Gay Friends* (IVP, 2007). The book's subtitle – 'A journey of informed compassion' – signals two things that this short volume does deliver: a quest to get the facts right, to assess these in the light of Scripture and to do both with the love and compassion Christians are called to show. Using real-life stories and biblical teaching, the author shows Christians how to love their gay friends with informed compassion. She starts with the questions we increasingly hear: Does God make people gay? Why does it seem more difficult to share the gospel with gay people? What should I do if my friend starts a gay relationship? Moreover, she answers them with honesty and without the slick and clichéd triumphalism too often heard in conservative circles. It is written in an honest, intelligent and compassionate way and includes chapters on 'What the Bible says' and 'Origins of homosexuality.' A theological reviewer in Britain wrote: "There is no way to describe this book other than brilliant. It is Christ-like, biblical, pastoral, informed, insightful, compassionate and loving evangelicalism at its best. It is necessary reading if you've got gay friends, and essential reading if you haven't."

But having drawn attention to these fine resources, this reviewer would like to add several important qualifications to what is often assumed to be the conservative position.

(1) *Let's not forget that the only existence we have as Christians is as embodied, human and sexual beings.* Very helpful here is Cherith Fee Nordling, 'Embodied, Human, Sexual: The Only Way to Be Christian' (Perspectives, November 2007). This is not to agree with the gay-sexualized notion of moral agency and personal identity that we will critique below. She offers a persuasive reminder that our bodies and sexuality are God-given. She neatly deals to the gnostic distaste for matters bodily, sexual and experiential that persist in some Christian circles and that distort reactions to discussions of sexuality – particularly the supposed sexuality of other people.

(2) *Let's be careful how we handle the 'big five' biblical texts that critique gay practice.* This is one of the key reminders of Andrew Marin's excellent *Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community* (InterVarsity Press, 2009). Marin's life changed radically in 2000 when, during three consecutive months, his three best friends all came out to him. A self-described homophobic, straight, Bible-believing, conservative Christian alpha-male, Marin's world was rocked by the revelations of his friends. Determined to find some answers to his crisis, he made the dramatic choice to become what he calls "the gayest straight dude in America," as he and his wife followed God's call to move to a predominantly gay neighbourhood in Chicago and immerse themselves in the gay and lesbian community. This book describes the lessons learned, experiences had and lives touched in the years following. Not only is Marin's story both moving and missional, he also offers persuasive reminders both that Jesus repeatedly refused to provide "Yes? or No?" answers to big questions and that the 'big five' biblical texts that undergird resistance to revisionist readings must be connected with the big-picture concerns of Scripture and not simply applied to yes or no questions about specific behaviours.

(3) *Let's keep emphasizing the often absent discipleship dimension.* This is a strong emphasis in Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Brazos, 2005). Or google up

her article 'Sex in the Body of Christ: Chastity is a spiritual discipline for the whole church' in one of *Christianity Today's* 2005 issues. Discipleship is part of the cultural resistance that Christians are called to. Philip Turner, the former Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, in 'The Episcopalian Preference,' *First Things*, 137 (November 2003), points out that liberal proponents typically see moral agents as "as *individuals, selves, and persons* who have the right to pursue their own preferences, whatever they may be. This is the very way in which liberals think of themselves as moral agents. It tempts Christians to adopt a vision of moral and social life that runs counter to the very foundations of Christian thought and practice." And the question of costly discipleship is one of the issues raised in the comprehensive six page response by Les Brighton, 'Why Motion 30 is God's Gift to the Church.' Email him for a copy at [brightons@xtra.co.nz](mailto:brightons@xtra.co.nz).

(4) *Let's also avoid semi-Pelagian moralizing.* There is a forceful reminder of this danger from an Episcopalian evangelical theologian, Wesley Hill, in his 'To Substitute Another Thirst: An Antidote to Moralism in the Same-Sex Marriage Debates,' (*First Things*, 25 September 2014). What he hears on both sides of the same-sex marriage debate is the "semi-Pelagianism" that he summarises as "a theological mood or a set of impulses that's opposed to a strong doctrine of original sin." He is critical of the belief that identity and wholeness are somehow formed and mediated by sexual encounter (so that "Eros"—or the human pursuit and cultivation of it—"is the real mediator here, not Jesus Christ.") But he continues: "things aren't always better in the traditionalist camp. Mirroring the rhetoric of some of their ideological opponents, conservatives, too, can fall into the moralizing, semi-Pelagian trap. We—I count myself among them—can speak of celibacy as a faithful path for gay Christians in such sunny, sanguine terms that one might think salvation / wholeness comes by saying no to gay sex rather than by the mediation of Christ. ... Arguably, both sides have failed to take seriously enough the depth of our collective human fall into sin."

Finally, two telling quotes that neatly summarise much of what this survey has argued. The first is by Philip Turner again. He contends that the agenda

of the gay lobby in his own church ('ECUSA') is the:

theological projection of a society built upon preference. ECUSA's God has become the image of this society. Gone is the notion of divine judgment (save upon those who may wish to exclude someone), gone is the notion of radical conversion, gone is the notion of a way of life that requires dying to self and rising to newness of life in conformity with God's will. In place of the complex God revealed in Christ Jesus, a God of both judgment and mercy, a God whose law is meant to govern human life, we now have a God who is love and inclusion without remainder. The projected God of the liberal tradition is, in the end, no more than an affirmer of preferences: idolatry, the creation of a God made in our own image.

The Anglican church in these southern islands risks exactly the same idolatry. And, as for the more precise issue of what has become one defining issue – the possible recognition of same-sex unions "by means of public blessings that are seen as being ... analogous to Christian marriage" – the summary by Rowan Williams only a few years ago still rings true:

In the light of the way in which the Church has consistently read the Bible for the last two thousand years, it is clear that a positive answer to this question would have to be based on the most painstaking biblical exegesis and on a wide acceptance of the results within the Communion, with due account taken of the teachings of ecumenical partners also. A major change naturally needs a strong level of consensus and solid theological grounding. This is not our situation in the Communion. Thus a blessing for a same-sex union cannot have the authority of the Church Catholic, or even of the Communion as a whole.

There seems no reason to disagree. The debate is partly a power struggle and, sadly, it includes the pitting of western (especially North American, and possibly now New Zealand) against non-western Anglican churches. Having been pushed around for centuries by the larger, richer, white portion of Anglicanism, churches in the majority world have had enough and are wanting a new order and some respect for their priorities which – as they see it – don't include capitulating to the western liberal agenda.