

A response to Keith Dyer's "A Consistent Biblical Approach to '(homo)sexuality'"

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I have a dream that one day all people may come to value and express (if they choose) their sexuality in accord with the Biblical principles of mutuality, commitment and love, and thereby accept and embrace themselves and each other as God's beloved regardless of their sexual orientation or genital equipment.¹

Dr Keith Dyer

On May 29, 2009 the Assembly of the Baptist Union of Victoria reappointed Dr Keith Dyer as Professor of New Testament, Whitely College.² The appointment was supported by the leadership of both the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) and of Whitely College. It was approved by the required two-thirds majority of delegates.

At the time questions were asked by delegates regarding Keith's views on sexuality expressed in two published articles. The leadership of the BUV and Whitely affirmed that they were aware of his writings on sexuality and that they fully supported his appointment.

I am writing in response to these events because I am concerned by Keith's views on sexuality. I think they are out of step with what the Scriptures teach, and the Church has believed throughout its history. If accepted I think they have serious implications for the future of the BUV and its churches.

I wish to explain why by responding to a number of points that Keith makes in his article and then ask the bigger question regarding the direction of the BUV.

1. The authority of experience and the authority of Scripture

The attitudes of people are changed not by arguments or exegesis, but by personal encounters with a friend or a family member who is found to be 'homosexual' and Christian. After that comes the need for exegesis and reinterpretation, as we seek to understand this new reality in the light of our traditions-just as the early Christians struggled to come to terms with the presence of the Spirit in uncircumcised Gentiles, against all their Biblical expectations.

Dr Keith Dyer

Keith is right. Our attitudes are far more likely to change in the face of personal experience, especially if that experience involves a friend or family member. But personal experience is not final arbitrator of the mind God.

¹ All quotes are taken from Keith's article, "A Consistent Biblical Approach to '(homo)sexuality'" published on the John Mark Ministries website, <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/20763.htm> (accessed June 15, 2009).

² See Murray Campbell's account at: http://mentonebaptistchurch.blogspot.com/2009/06/victorian-baptist-assembly-may-2009_8134.html (accessed June 15, 2009).

The Corinthian church had the experience of a member who was sexually involved with his step-mother, it had the experience of members who were greedy and gluttonous, it had members who were divisive. Paul called for each of these individuals to be disciplined, to repent and in some cases to be removed from the church.

Keith draws an analogy with the change in the understanding that came to the early Christians when the Spirit was given to uncircumcised Gentiles “against all their Biblical expectations.” Their experience led Jewish Christians to understand how God was now at work to reach the whole world in fulfillment of his purpose in choosing Israel. God’s universal concern permeates the witness of the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi.

There is no equivalent theme throughout the Old Testament of the acceptance of homosexual practices. When the Spirit was given at Pentecost he empowered the Church to take the gospel to the world. There is no record in the New Testament of the Spirit leading the Apostles and the Church into a new understanding of God’s acceptance of homosexuality.

2. The distinction between male and female

... [T]he Genesis account (Gen 1:27) and its affirmation by Jesus (Mk 10:6; Mt 19:4) and indirectly by Paul (Gal 3:28) make it plain that we are created in God's image as humans (adam) 'male and female', which is deliberately expressed inclusively rather than as the dichotomous 'male or female'. Our human sexuality is a wholistic (sic) continuum, not a bifurcated polarity, and this both reflects the image of God and is in turn reflected in creation by a wondrous diversity.

Whereas it is possible and desirable, therefore, to affirm 'heterosexuality' as the created 'norm', it should be done so without denying the natural existence of other realities along the spectrum between maleness and femaleness.

Dr Keith Dyer

Genesis 1:27 is a foundational text on humankind as male and female in the image of God. Keith argues that Genesis 1:27 teaches an unbroken continuity between male and female rather than a dichotomous distinction.

According to this understanding of the text, every human being is somewhere along the continuum between male and female. He believes Jesus upholds this view of a continuum rather than distinction in his teaching on marriage (Matt 19:12). This is a serious misreading of these two texts and of the whole witness of Scripture.

Are we to believe that this understanding of human sexuality undergirds the original intention of the writer of Genesis? Is this the witness of the Old Testament? Is this what Jesus is affirming when he teaches that marriage unites a male *and* female? Is this Paul’s view or that of the early church? No dichotomy, no distinction between male and female?

The Scriptures are clear. God created humankind male *and* female to reflect his diversity in unity. There is a distinction throughout the whole of Scripture between male and female and their is unity in our shared humanity in the image of God. Just as in the Trinity there is both distinction and there is unity.

It has taken thousands of years for this notion of no distinction between the sexes to emerge, and it’s wrong. It owes more to reading prevailing social norms back into the text than good exegesis.

3. What is at stake

We haven't even really begun to ask what role the affirmation of the 'homosexual', the 'intersexual' and the 'transsexual' might play in awakening the church to its full glory as the body of Christ.

This is not just an issue concerning private morality and sexual preference. It is a justice issue-an issue of righteousness in the private and public spheres-and a matter of life and death for some in our community so traumatised by the perils of discovering their sexual identity and orientation that they live in constant fear and even take their own life.

Dr Keith Dyer

Here the article links affirmation of homosexuality, intersexuality and transexuality with the awakening of the Church to its full glory as the body of Christ. In other words the Church cannot reflect the image of Christ to the world without a radical reorientation in its understanding of human sexuality. If this is true, nothing could be more important or more central.

In addition, affirmation of homosexual practice, including homosexual marriage and adoption of children, is a justice issue. According to the article lives are at stake. People committing suicide because of the trauma inflicted by the church's position.

This is serious stuff. The glory of the body of Christ and the lives of traumatised people are at stake. Yet surprisingly the article rejects the need for a militant campaign to change the mind of "Church authorities." It's enough for Keith if local congregations are allowed to welcome and affirm homosexual practice by Christians. Yet if so much is at stake, why not a militant campaign? Or at least a campaign? If what is being taught here is true, there *must* be a campaign. People are dying and the glory of Christ is tarnished because for 2,000 years the Church has not understood the mind of God on homosexuality.

If these views are true, they must be acted upon. If accepted they have serious implications for how we teach our children, teens and young adults about sexuality. They have serious implications for our witness in society.

Although, the target of any campaign should not be directed at "Church authorities" as Keith suggests. History shows that in the secularized West, church authorities are far more likely than ordinary church members and pastors to affirm homosexual practice. The campaign must focus on the ordinary people who make the up membership of our churches. They are the ones most concerned when they finally discover the true position of their leaders within denominational institutions.

4. What to do with the plain sense of Scripture?

Those who appeal to the 'plain sense' of Scripture about this and other issues-as if there does not even need to be any further discussion of what the Bible says-are in danger of reducing God's Living Word to a book of dead letters: immutable laws written in ink, or on stone (2 Cor 3:3). We are not called to be defenders of unchangeable rules, for we are 'competent to be servants of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life' (2 Cor 3:6).

Dr Keith Dyer

Here we have an attempt to use the Scriptures to undermine the authority of the Scriptures. Who is this “spirit”? Is it the Holy Spirit that Jesus promise He would send to lead his disciples into the full significance of his person, work on the Cross and his resurrection? Is the Spirit who inspired the writing of Scripture and it’s understanding of sexuality and other matters. Or is it the “spirit” of the modern-postmodern age?

The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, who inspired the authors who wrote the text that is now alleged to bring death rather than life. We are not called to be “defenders of unchangeable *rules*.” We are called, in an age of relativism, to be “defenders of unchanging *truths*.”

Christian communities do not have the power to “bind and loose” (Matt 16:19; Jn 20:22-23) on these matters as the article states. We are bound by the Word of God. That’s why men like the Apostle Paul, Luther, Wilberforce and Bonhoffer could stand against evil and injustice when the “Christian communities” of their day had surrendered to the spirit of the age.

By the grace of God we are called to obey the plain sense of the witness of Scripture, no matter what the cost.

Conclusion

The concerns I express here in response to Keith’s article are not primarily about Keith, or even his appointment. My concern is with our denomination, its leadership and direction. Keith was reappointed with the full support of the leadership of the BUV and our denominational college, and by a two-thirds majority of delegates.

I think the most important question is this: Are the churches and BUV members in support of its leadership and its college in the direction they have set by their support of Keith’s reappointment?

I have no interest in long drawn out debates and meetings around this issue. But BUV members and churches must have clarification regarding the position of its leadership and college. As difficult as these issues are, they must be brought out into the open.