

Communion and Koinonia: Pauline Reflections on Tolerance and Boundaries

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Introduction: Paul's Context

From the very beginning, the church was faced with the problem of different cultures coming together. Even in the earliest days, when all Christians were Jews, there were Greek-speaking Jews and Hebrew (or Aramaic-) speaking Jews, and problems arose between them. Even during the public career of Jesus, there were different reactions to him, including among his own followers, and we may suppose that these were sometimes to do with what we would call culture just as much as they may have been to do with personality, preference, temperament, level of faith, and so forth. Once the Christian message reached the Gentile world, not least in a swirling pluralistic metropolis like Antioch, all the cultures of the Orient would be jostling together, and the impact of this rich mixture on the church was bound to be considerable.

Coping with a pluralist environment was not, of course, anything new for Jews, and early Christianity remained very firmly Jewish. Diaspora Judaism had faced the challenge of the pagan environment for many centuries; nor was there an iron curtain screening off Palestine from pagan influences. 'Galilee of the Gentiles' may have been home to many zealous and Torah-observant Jews, but it also contained many Gentile institutions, and, ever since the time of Alexander the Great, Hellenistic culture had been the backdrop for ordinary life in the Middle East. Sometimes this culture had forced itself on Judaism, as under Antiochus Epiphanes, persuading some to compromise their Judaism, to go along with the pagan ways, and others to take to the hills, plot revolt, and prepare for martyrdom. The folk memory of this and other clashes were alive and well in the first century, not least among those who, like Saul of Tarsus, were 'zealous for Torah'.

The problem of what counts as compromise, what is perfectly acceptable, what must be resisted at all costs, and what you may get away with for a while but should expect to tidy up sooner or later – all of this is therefore familiar ground to most Jews of the first century, certainly those who did any travelling. And that, of course, is what Paul spent a lot of time doing, living for a while not only in Antioch but also in Ephesus and Corinth, with shorter stays in other places around the Mediterranean and Aegean seaboard. He was thoroughly familiar with the different customs of different places, and with the problems of Christian behaviour that arose from them. His letters, particularly those to Corinth, reflect exactly this set of questions, and are a goldmine for those prepared to work at finding out what he really had to say.

One theme of Paul's letters, particularly those to Corinth and Rome, is his emphasis on the need to tolerate, within the Christian fellowship, those who have different opinions on contentious issues. 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14 stand out here; though, from a somewhat different angle, Galatians 2 is also extremely relevant, and as we shall see Colossians 2 and 3 need to be factored into the picture as well. But it clearly will not do to simply say that Paul advocates 'tolerance' and leave it at that. In the same letters there are a good many passages in which he shows himself robustly intolerant of all kinds of types and modes of behaviour. How can we give an account of this? Was

Paul just inconsistent, trying to get people to put up with one another's foibles but insisting that his prejudices at least were sacrosanct?

This highlights our central theme, which is *koinonia*, 'fellowship' or 'partnership', and what it means in practice. Paul is our earliest Christian writer. He preached the gospel in a radically plural world, with every variety of culture, religion, politics, and ethics. He did indeed insist on justification by faith, and on the unity of Jew and Gentile, and by implication everyone else too, in Christ. What did he mean by this? What was the basis of his 'tolerance'? How do we explain the times when, despite urging tolerance and unity, he lays down firm rules, even to the extent of insisting that people who break them should be put out of Christian fellowship?

Perspectives on Paul, the Law, 'Tolerance' and Ethics

As most of you will know, there has been a remarkable shift of opinion in Pauline scholarship over the last generation. The massive though uneven work of Ed P. Sanders, mainly in his book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), heralded what was quickly called 'the new perspective on Paul'. The very phrase has become something of a red rag to several bulls over the last two or three years, and this is not the time to enter into the current debate in any detail. I want to state two things very clearly: first, that the so-called new perspective on Paul, with its main exponents as Sanders and Dunn, has made two or three important, accurate and theologically fruitful points; second, that it has also got quite a lot of things wrong, and has in certain cases not followed through its own insights where they properly should have gone. I am thus a critical insider to the New Perspective, supporting some of its main thrusts but remaining deeply critical at certain other points. If you want to see how this works out in practice, read my new commentary on Romans in volume 10 of the *New Interpreter's Bible*. It simply won't do to wave the New Perspective away, as some have tried to do, and to go back to Martin Luther as though he solved all our problems. Luther got some things gloriously right and other things gloriously wrong. If, for instance, you have to choose between Luther and Calvin in New Testament theology, in my judgement you should normally go with Calvin; that, in fact, was where I myself came in, wrestling with Charles Cranfield's essentially Calvinistic interpretation of Paul and Romans, knowing that it was superior to the Lutheran and evangelical commentaries I was used to, but discovering at an exegetical level it didn't quite work. It was in that context, in the mid-1970's, that I read Sanders, and found that, though there was much I didn't agree with at the time and still don't, there was also much that was helpful in the essential task: allowing the text to speak for itself, instead of imposing our traditions upon it.

So what are the true insights of the 'new perspective', and how may they help us in thinking about *koinonia*, tolerance, and related issues?

The main thrust of Sanders's work, which I endorse, is that first century Judaism was not a system of Pelagian-style works-righteousness. First century Jews were not imagining that they had to earn 'righteousness', that is, basic membership in God's people, membership in the covenant, through doing moral good deeds. They did not regard the Torah, the Jewish law, as a ladder of good works up which they had to climb, with salvation as the reward at the top. On the contrary. As any good Calvinist could have told Sanders, they regarded the Torah as a good, lovely, God-given thing, not a ladder of good works for eager merit-earners, but the way of life for the people already redeemed. God chose Israel; God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt by an act of sheer grace and power; and God then gave Israel the Torah, not to earn their status with God but to demonstrate it. Now it is true, of course, that the Mishnah and Talmud, the codified commentaries and elaborations on Torah-

keeping which grew up over the half-millennium after Paul's day, do indeed look like the kind of casuistical law-mongering which many people think of today when they hear the word 'legalism'. But Sanders's point here stands, despite many attempts to dislodge it. The main motive for keeping the law in Judaism was not to earn membership in the people of God, or justification or salvation, but to express one's gratitude for it, to demonstrate one's membership, and ultimately to become the sort of person God clearly intended you to become. In Lutheran terms, it was *tertius usus legis*. In Calvinist terms, this was why God gave the law in the first place.

What then about the famous Pauline phrase, 'works of law'? Here is the second insight of the 'new perspective' comes into play, which I shall argue is the key one for discussion we need in today's Anglican communion in discussions of *koinonia*, tolerance, and boundaries. James Dunn has argued strongly, following the line of thought which I myself pioneered but taking it a stage further, that 'the works of the law' which Paul declares do not justify are not in general moral principles, a 'law' in that sense, but 'the works of the law' which marked out Jews from their pagan neighbours. They are, in other words, circumcision, the food laws, and the sabbaths – the three things which every Jew in the ancient world, and many pagans in the ancient world too, knew were the boundary-markers between Jews and pagans. The point in keeping these was to say, "We are Jews, not pagans outside the Torah. We are God's people; he has made his covenant with us; we are called to be the light of the world, and by keeping God's law we will keep ourselves separate from the world and show the world who God really is'.

The third insight which I myself bring to, and take from the New Perspective has to do with Paul's critique of Israel. Paul's critique of Israel is not that Israel is guilty of the kind of legalism of which Augustine criticised Pelagius, or Luther criticised Erasmus. Certainly Paul is not accusing Israel of the half-hearted moralistic Pelagianism of which, it used to be said, the average Englishman was guilty of most of the time, doing a few good deeds now and then and hoping God would notice and give him a pat on the back at the end of the day. (There aren't so many people like that around today, as you may have noticed.) Rather, Paul is criticising Israel, his own former self included, for saying that God was exclusively Israel's God. Israel, he says, is ignorant of God's righteousness, and is seeking to establish her own, a 'righteousness' which would be for Jews and Jews only; whereas, in Jesus the Jewish Messiah, and by the cross and resurrection, God has thrown open covenant membership, 'righteousness', to all who believe (Romans 10.1-4)

This very brief account of three points where I believe New Perspective has its finger on a key issue which is of enormous help exegetically and theologically. It does not, as is sometimes suggested, mean losing anything from the cutting edge of the gospel as we have traditionally understood it; on the contrary, it sharpens it up. But there is no time to develop this here. Rather, I want to indicate the enormous gain, precisely for the debates which face us in the Anglican Communion, in understanding Paul this way. The point is this: when Paul appeals for 'tolerance' in the church, the issues over which he saying there should be no quarrels are precisely the issue where there were cultural boundary-markers, especially between Jewish and Gentile Christians. He is not being arbitrary in selecting some apparently 'ethical' issues to go soft on, while remaining firm on others. The things about which Christians must be prepared to agree or disagree are the things which would otherwise divide the church along ethnic lines.

This point is sometimes missed because of the clever writing of the key chapter, Romans 14. Nowhere does Paul mention the words 'Jew' and 'Gentile', though it eventually becomes explicit in the next chapter. He doesn't want them to focus on the fact that some of them are Jewish and others of them are Gentile. He wants them to say to themselves, 'Some of us in this new movement are

happy eating any meat at all, others prefer to stick to vegetables.’ (If all the meat you could get in a pagan city had been sacrificed to idols, and if all the cheap meat you could get was pork, obviously people with Jewish scruples, or with tender consciences of young ex-pagan Christians converted after years of assiduous idol-worship, might well decide to go the vegetarian route instead.) ‘Some of us’, he wants them to say, ‘like to observe special days in honour of the Lord; others of us are happy to treat all, days the same way.’ Then, in 1 Corinthians 7, he says, in effect, ‘some of us are circumcised and are happy to be that way; others of us are uncircumcised and should be happy to stay that way.’ In all these things he wants Christians to stop thinking of themselves as basically belonging to this or that ethnic group, and to see the practices that formerly demarcated that ethnic group from all others as irrelevant, things you can carry on doing if you like but which you shouldn’t insist on for others.

This, too, is what underlies the debate about justification and circumcision in Galatians 2. The question underneath the passage is not, ‘Do we have to perform good moral deeds in order to get to heaven,’ but rather, ‘Are Jewish Christians allowed to sit down and eat at the same table as Gentile Christians, when the latter have not been circumcised?’ For Paul this is a central issue; the heart of the gospel is at stake. When Jesus Christ died and rose again he transformed the covenant people of God into a single, worldwide family for whom the only defining badge is faith, not just any old faith but the very specific faith that Jesus is risen from the dead as Messiah and Lord of the world. This, indeed, is the meaning of ‘justification by faith’; that it is this faith, and this faith alone, that marks out God’s people in the present time.

Making this distinction between ‘works’ in general, ‘lawkeeping’ in general if you like, and the more specific ‘works’ which mark the distinction between Jew and Gentile, frees us once and for all from the tyranny of that vague liberalism which holds that Paul played ‘faith’ off against ‘law’ or ‘works’, and which then uses that as a way of avoiding the sharp edges of every ethical issue in sight. If you want to know why Paul insisted on tolerating some differences of opinion and practice within the people of God, and on not tolerating others, the answer is that the ones that were to be tolerated were the ones that carried the connotations of ethnic boundary lines, and the ones that were not to be tolerated were the ones that marked the difference between genuine, living, renewed humanity and false, corruptible, destructive humanity. This is my shorthand for a range of issues which he deals with in several passages. I take one classic example, from Colossians.

In Colossians 2 Paul insists that the Jewish law has nothing to say to you if you are in Christ. If with the Messiah you died to the elements of the world, why should you submit to mere human regulations – touch not, taste not, handle not! These, he says, all have an appearance of wisdom and of promoting ascetic discipline, but they are of no real value. You don’t need Jewish law, particularly food laws, in order to define who the people of God are and build them up as God’s truly human people.

What then? Shall we do as we please? Certainly not! In Colossians 3 Paul instructs us to ‘seek the things that are above’; and when he spells out what this will mean in practice the list in verses 5-11 boil down to two areas of life in particular: sexual malpractice, and anger, malice and so on. (It is interesting, and important for debates within our Communion, that we note how he places these two side by side; there are many churches where immorality would not be tolerated but where anger and malice reign unchecked, just as there are many which are full of sweet tolerance and people being nice to each other but where immorality is rife and never rebuked.) The key to it all comes in verses 9-10: you have stripped off the old humanity with its practices, and have put on the new humanity, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. At this point there can be

no dispute, no room for divergent opinions: no room, in other words, for someone to say ‘some Christians practice fornication, others think its wrong, so we should be tolerant of one another,’ or to say ‘some Christians lose their tempers, others think its wrong, so we should tolerate one another’. There is no place for immorality, and no place for anger, slander and the like. And then, immediately, as though to emphasize the point I’m making, Paul concludes the passage by saying (v.11) that ‘in that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but in Christ is all in all.’ Paul is absolutely clear about the standards expected of the new humanity, and equally clear that distinctions relating to ethnic, social and cultural origin become irrelevant.

Of course, if someone were to say, ‘Because I’m a Scythian, and we Scythians simply lose our tempers a lot, that’s part of our culture,’ Paul would respond, ‘Not now you’re a Christian you don’t.’ If a Corinthian were to say, ‘Because I’m a Corinthian, I have always had a string of girlfriends I sleep with, that’s part of our culture,’ Paul would respond, ‘Not now you’re a Christian you don’t.’ This is where the word ‘culture’ lets us down, because it covers so many things. We need to make a clear distinction between the aspects of a culture which Paul regards as morally neutral and those which he regards as morally, or immorally, loaded. And we need to note carefully what Paul’s reaction is when someone disagrees at either side of his balance. When Peter and the others tried to insist on keeping their Jewish distinctives, i.e. only eating with other circumcised people, in Antioch, Paul resisted him to his face. The word ‘tolerance’ runs out of steam at this point. What mattered was the gospel, the message of the cross, the doctrine of justification by faith, the promises to Abraham, the single family God intended to create in the Spirit. Like a great chess player, Paul saw all those pieces on the board threatened by this one move of Peter’s to insist on maintaining Jewish boundary-markers, and he moved at once to head it off. And when someone disagreed with Paul’s clear rules on immorality or angry disputes, the matters he deals with in Colossians 3.5-10, he is equally firm, as we see dramatically in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6. There is no place in the Christian fellowship for such practices and for such a person. Not for one minute does he contemplate saying, ‘some of us believe in maintaining traditional taboos on sexual relations within prescribed family limits, others think these are now irrelevant in Christ, so both sides must respect the other.’ He says, ‘throw him out’.

I hope it is clear from all this that Paul is thinking with entire consistency. Of course, if we come to him with a less than adequate frame of reference, such a low-grade protestant understanding which has downgraded free grace into cheap grace, it is easy to get muddled and then, projecting our problems onto Paul, to accuse him of the muddle, as though he had simply decided to hold onto some bits of an ethical code and go soft on other bits. No: when we get to know Paul better we see what is going on.

In particular, we may remind ourselves of the towering significance, in his thought, of Romans 6.1-11. Having just expounded the gospel of grace, God’s rich, welcoming and forgiving love meeting us where we are, helpless sinners (5.6-10), he faces the question: if God’s grace meets while we are sinners, must we therefore stay as sinners so that God’s grace can go on meeting us there? He knows the answer as soon as he has asked the question, but a great many people in today’s church do not know it and cheerfully answer, ‘Yes!’ instead. It is one of the most important principles of biblical ethics, and one trampled in the mud again and again in contemporary debate: that God’s grace meets us where we are, but God’s grace, thank God, does not leave us where we are; that God accepts us as we are, but that God’s grace, thank God, is always a transforming acceptance, so that in God’s very act of loving us and wooing our answering love we are being changed; and, more dramatically, in baptism and all that it means we are actually dying and rising, leaving one whole way of life and

entering upon a wholly different one.

Let us hear no more, then, of the sub-Pauline idea that since we are justified by grace through faith there is no need for a life of holiness, and that to insist on one is to smuggle ‘works’ in by the back door. Another potential great gain of the so-called ‘new perspective’, though not usually worked out by its major exponents, is the fact that it allows Paul’s own emphasis on final judgement according to works, which he insists on again and again, to emerge into its proper light without damaging or endangering in any way the basic principle of justification by faith itself. (See, for instance, Romans 2.1-16; 14.10-12; 2 Corinthians 5.6-10; and compare e.g. 1 Thessalonians 3.19-20; see my Romans commentary on the key passages.)

This, indeed, is the principle that underlies some of the most subtle and joined-up thinking in that subtle and joined-up letter 1 Corinthians. When Paul writes a long chapter on the resurrection of the body (chapter 15), this is not simply because he has been working through a long list of topics and has now decided to deal with this one. It is because the resurrection of the body has been basic to his understanding throughout, not least his understanding of ethics, not least his view of sexual ethics. The argument of 1 Corinthians hinges on the fact that what you do with your body matters, since God intends to raise it from the dead. Paul faces moral relativism in this chapter and names it for what it is: it is dehumanizing and degrading. The body of the Christian is already the temple of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit will be God’s agent in raising the body from the dead. The continuity, therefore, between the present body and the transformed, resurrected body lies at the heart of Paul’s appeal here and elsewhere in the letter. When final judgement occurs, it will not be arbitrary; it is not the case that God has made up a list of rules upon some kind of whim. Final judgement will be according to genuine humanness, and genuine humanness is what truly reflects the image of God. That is why the language of image-bearing, and other related concepts, are found in Paul, at several key points. We have already noted Colossians 3.10, which is itself dependent on Colossians 1.15-20; and we should add Romans 8.29 and 2 Corinthians 4.1-6 as other obvious examples.

My argument, then, is that if we learn to read Paul aright, taking the best of contemporary scholarship while refusing some of the follies into which it sometimes falls, we have a sharp tool with which to understand why Paul says what he does about tolerance of different view points on the one hand and why he says what he does about not tolerating immorality on the other hand. And this leads to my final section, in which I want to reflect on where we are as a culture in handling these issues, and then to say some Pauline things about three issues currently before us.

Current Issues in Pauline Perspective

Let me first reflect on our own cultural climate. The fact that our early twenty-first century instinct is to analyse Paul in terms of prejudices and inconsistency shows well enough what sort of intellectual – or perhaps we should say anti-intellectual – climate we now live in within the western church at least. We have allowed ourselves to say ‘I feel’ when we mean ‘I think’, collapsing serious thought into knee-jerk reactions. We have become tolerant of everything except intolerance, about which we ourselves are extremely intolerant. If someone thinks through an issue and, irrespective of his or her feelings on the subject, reaches a considered judgement that doing X is right and doing Y is wrong, they no sooner come out and say so than someone else will accuse them of phobia. If someone says stealing is wrong, we expect someone else to say, ‘You only say that because you’re kleptophobic.’

You will see easily enough where this argument is going. In order to have any serious discussion about ethical issues, we need to remind ourselves the whole time of the importance of Reason (along with, and obedient to Scripture and Tradition) as one strand of the classic threefold Anglican cord. The current fashion for substituting ‘experience’, which all too easily means ‘feeling’, or ‘reported feeling’, is simply not the same sort of thing. Experience matters, but it doesn’t belong in an account of authority; put it there, and the whole notion of ‘authority’ itself deconstructs before your very eyes.

Another major feature of our contemporary culture must be put on the table from the start. We are in the middle of a painful and complex transition, in the western world at least, from what is often called ‘modernism’ to what is loosely called ‘postmodernism’. In very broad, general terms, modernism was the philosophical and cultural movement that came from the European Enlightenment, and produced not only the French but also the American revolution. One of its primary moves was rebellion against authority – in the French case, against the church and crown, in the American case against England – and the proclamation of freedom against constraints of systems, including ethical systems, that were perceived to be outmoded, unnecessary, or repressive. A great deal of our prevailing cultural, moral and political rhetoric still appeals to this matrix of thought, within which one of the greatest terms of abuse is of course ‘mediaeval’.

This modernist/Enlightenment movement has produced large syntheses of thought, including the split, inherited from Deism, between God and the world, making religion a matter of private opinion and ethics a matter of private feeling (see above), and insisting that everybody’s religion, and way of life, was more or less as good as everybody else’s. At least, the Enlightenment insisted on this in theory; many prejudices remain intact in practice. That is another story. Equally, modernism has bequeathed us what now appears to most people a standard mode of political discourse, with a right/left split in which all kinds of political and even theological judgements are ranged across a spectrum in which, once you have discovered where someone is located on one issue, you can more or less guess what other views he or she will hold. This suggests, in fact, that these are not views which have been thought through, but are simply the assumed posture for someone who ‘feels comfortable’ (note the language) at that point. The Age of Reason has thus begotten the Age of Feeling, as Romanticism has taken a ride on the back of revolutionary thought. ‘What Many of Us Feel’ is thus elevated to the moral high ground, without noticing that the Holocaust itself, that ethical (or anti-ethical) benchmark of the twentieth century, was perpetrated by people who were doing What Many of Them Felt.

Romanticism in turn has undergone a transition into existentialism, where the quest for personal authenticity has become self-justifying. Being true to oneself, discovering ‘who I really am’, ‘getting in touch with my inner identity’ and phrases like this have also become ways of claiming a moral position to which there is no allowed answer. If a murderer or child-molester turns out, on careful interviewing, to have been expressing and living out who he or she truly was, then of course we quietly demur and hope that there is a psychiatric ward secure enough, if it cannot cure them, to keep them off the streets. Our society does not choose to notice that there is no obvious break in this respect between different types of behaviour, some of which are deemed completely unacceptable socially and some of which are not. And we should not be surprised that the rhetoric of existentialism has made room for a sharp rise, in the West, of a now very fashionable neo-gnosticism. Discover that you have an inner spark, underneath the layers of learned or imposed morality or convention, and then you must be true to it, whatever it takes, so that you can be truly

free, truly yourself. Why do you think that the *Gospel of Thomas* has suddenly returned to vogue?

All of these – the age of reason, romanticism, existentialism – are in their various ways the products of the Enlightenment, and the revolutionary subtext they carry continue to be powerful. Don't try to stop us going this way, they all say, or we will declare that you are taking us back to the feudal age, trying to imprison us within old-fashioned categories. You are being 'mediaeval'. It is important to say, right from the start, that none of these interesting lines of thought have very much to do with Christianity, with the gospel of Jesus Christ or with Christian behaviour. And it is also important to say that many people, not least in the Western world and church, do not realise this.

Over recent decades, modernism has had a bad press, particularly (and in my view rightly) because its grand scheme has allowed two centuries of western imperialism to proceed unchecked, on the assumption that since we have come of age it was our duty to bring the benefits of our new-found wisdom to the rest of the world. This, it has now been said, times without number, has simply served to underscore the arrogance and greed of empire. The so-called 'masters of suspicion' who arose within the Enlightenment project – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – stuck pins into what looked like objective statements of facts and truth and discovered that they could usually be accused of being in someone's interests, whether sexual, political or financial. We now distrust everything, and indeed the erosion of trust within Western society has become such a feature that this year's Reith Lectures were devoted to the subject. The remarkable revelations about large-scale financial irregularities of some of the West's major companies makes one wonder how much further we have to go before we hit rock bottom and admit that we are all living simply by the law of the jungle.

Within this world, postmodernity has come to birth, overturning grand narratives ('metanarratives') by which people have ordered their lives and celebrating instead the small narratives, the little stories of this group or that, of this culture or that, claiming the right for them that they need not fit into anyone else's pattern, they must just be themselves. This too has become a fixed point of would-be moral discourse in western culture: if I can claim that this is the way my culture does something, you have no right of reply. Hence the anguished debates among feminists, for instance, about female circumcision, with the feminist instincts all being to say that such a practice is degrading and damaging to women's rights and the postmodern instincts all being to say that if that's how they do things in that culture, we have no right to criticize. This is not to say, of course, that postmodernity has not elevated its own moral standards into high, lofty principles, to offend against which is to be instantly outcast. But that, though ultimately very relevant to our subject, must wait for later.

All of these cultural forces shape the way that western persons have, for some time, been conditioning themselves to think and behave. These values are reinforced daily and hourly by the media, the movies, and the iconic celebrities of our culture. We should not be surprised when many within the churches conduct their discourse by appealing to these norms; it would take very serious Christian moral teaching to enable people to stand upright amidst these swirling hurricanes of fashionable opinion, and (with some notable exceptions) serious Christian moral teaching is not something we have had very much of in the West in recent years. In particular, much of the Western church has learnt, partly by explicit teaching and partly, I think by a kind of happy-go-lucky blend of bits and pieces of Christian teaching and bits and pieces of the surrounding culture, a general attitude to faith and morals which functions as a low-grade, watered-down version of the gospel announced by Jesus himself and applied by Paul. I hardly need to quote anyone in particular on this, because you have all met it again and again: every other day in newspapers someone comes out with it. Jesus, people say, was a very inclusive person; he never excluded anyone. He preached, therefore, a grand tolerance and acceptance of people. He welcomed sinners and outcasts. He found the people on the

margins and brought them in. This is brought together into the standard street level version of liberal protestantism, which in North America at least owes a certain amount to half-understood (or perhaps more than half understood?) Paul Tillich. ‘Accept that you are accepted’ is the gospel message: God loves you as you are, God accepts and welcomes you as you are. And the powerful second-order message for the church is therefore, God accepts people as they are, therefore you should accept them as they are. You shouldn’t impose artificial, old-fashioned, unnecessary, let alone (heaven help us!) ‘mediaeval’ restrictions on people.

If, within this culture, people think to appeal to the apostle Paul, which they often do not, they will not have much difficulty bringing him inside. Justification by faith was what Paul preached, after all, as opposed to justification by works of the law; therefore Paul cannot have intended that the old moral rules and regulations would clog up the works of the free-and-easy Christian church, celebrating its freedom in Christ and discovering its true identity. Justification by faith clearly means, once more, that God accepts us as we are; so the church has no right to impose anything else on people. They must be allowed to be themselves, to find themselves, to do their own thing, and we must indeed learn from their ‘experience’ as they do so. They must maintain the unity of the church at all costs. That is what Paul is supposed to stand for. And, if proof of this remarkable thesis is required, it can, it seems, be found: Paul insisted, after all, in both 1 Corinthians and Romans that the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’, those with radically different opinions about various different issues, should learn to defer to one another, and ultimately to live together in fellowship within one family. I hope I have said enough in the main section of this lecture to show that this way of reading Paul and early Christianity is entirely without foundation. We desperately need fresh and clear biblical thinking if we are to take on the casual assumptions of our culture, in both church and world, and point the way forward.

So to our three issues; and first, the issue of homosexual behaviour. It is, of course open to anyone to say, on the basis of my argument so far, that they regard the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual behaviour as one of those cultural distinctives which are irrelevant in the gospel; that homosexual behaviour simply is part of some cultures today, and that the church must respect, honour and bless it. You will not be surprised to know that I do not share this view. I am not an expert on current debates, and defer to two splendid books: Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, and Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. But I may perhaps, as a long-time specialist on the letter to the Romans, put in my small contribution.

Paul’s denunciation of homosexual practice in Romans 1 is well known but not so well understood, particularly in relation to its place in the argument as a whole. It is too often dismissed as simply firing some Jewish-style thunderbolts against typical pagan targets; and it is regularly thought to be dealing only with the deliberate choice of heterosexual individuals to abandon normal usage and indulge in alternative passions. It is often said that Paul is describing something quite different from the phenomenon we know today, e.g. in large western cities.

This is misleading. First, Paul is not primarily talking about individuals at this point, but about the entire human race. He is expounding Genesis 1-3, and looking at the human race as whole, so here he is categorizing the large sweep of human history as a whole – not, of course, that any individuals escape this judgement, as 3.19f makes clear. Second, the point of his highlighting of female and male turning away from natural usage to unnatural grows directly out of the text which is his subtext, here and often elsewhere: for in Genesis 1 it is of course male plus female that is created to bear God’s image. The male-plus-female factor is not of course specific to humanity; the principle of

‘male plus female’ runs through a great deal of creation. But humans were created to bear God’s image, and given a task, to be fruitful and multiply, to tend the garden and name the animals. The point of Romans 1 as a whole is that when humans refuse to worship or honour God, the God in whose image they are made, their humanness goes into self-destruct mode; and Paul clearly sees homosexual behaviour as ultimately a form of human deconstruction. He is not saying that everyone who discovers homosexual instincts has chosen to commit idolatry and has chosen homosexual behaviour as a part of that; rather, he is saying that in a world where men and women have refused to honour God this is the kind of thing you will find.

The fascinating thing is what Paul then does with this analysis of the plight of humankind. In Romans 4.18-22, when describing the way in which Abraham believed God and so was reckoned as righteous, Paul carefully reverses what has happened in Romans 1.18-23. Abraham believed that God had power to give life to the dead; he honoured God and did not waver in unbelief. That is why he is reckoned within the covenant, as ‘righteous’. And the result, of course, is that Abraham and Sarah become fruitful. Romans 1 is not a detached denunciation of wickedness in general. It is carefully integrated into the flow of thought of the letter. (See too 7.4-6 for the contrast between sinful lives which do not bear fruit, and life under the new covenant which does.) In particular, we may note the strong ethical imperatives of chapters 6, 8 and 12, in each of which, but particularly in 6.1-11 and 12.1-2, there are echoes both of Romans 1 and Genesis 1-3 which underlies it. Paul clearly believes that the application of the gospel to human lives produces new behaviour, renewed-human behaviour, newly imagebearing behaviour. It is not using Romans 1 as a proof-text, but as part of the tightly woven fabric of Paul’s greatest letter, to say that he certainly regards same-sex genital behaviour as dehumanized and dehumanizing.

A footnote on sexual behaviour in Paul’s world. If one looks at the ancient world there is of course evidence of same-sex behaviour in many contexts and settings. But it is noticeable that the best-known evidence comes from the high imperial days of Athens on the one hand and the high imperial days of Rome on the other (think of Nero, and indeed Paul may have been thinking of Nero). I have argued elsewhere, against the view that Paul was quiescent politically, that he held a strong implicit and sometimes explicit critique of pagan empire in general and of Rome in particular; and clearly denunciation of pagan sexual behaviour was part of that (e.g. Philippians 3.19-21). I just wonder if there is any mileage in cultural analysis of homosexual behaviour as a feature of cultures which themselves multiply and degenerate in the way that great empires are multiply degenerate, with money flowing in, arrogance and power flowing out, systemic violence on the borders and systematic luxury at the centre. Part of that imperial arrogance in our own day, I believe, is the insistence that we, the empire, the West, America, or wherever, are in a position to tell the societies that we are already exploiting in a thousand different ways that they should alter their deep-rooted moralities to accommodate our newly invented ones. There is something worryingly imperial about the practice itself and about the insistence on everybody else endorsing it. It is often said that the poor want justice while the rich want peace. We now have a situation where two-thirds of the world wants debt relief and one-third wants sex. That is, I think, a tell-tale sign that something is wrong at a deep structural level.

Second, more briefly, a comment about authority in the church. When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians he seemed to be able, quite cheerfully, to tell the church what to do, including giving instructions about expelling a notorious offender. Subsequently, according to 2 Corinthians, he made a painful visit to the church, and clearly found things not as he would have liked. (2 Corinthians 1.23-2.11). Subsequently again, or perhaps at the same time, he became aware that there was a substantial body of opinion in the church, egged on by some newly-arrived teachers, who were stirring up trouble and

opposition against him. He addresses this issue in 2 Corinthians; and I want to tell you, having recently completed a translation of both the Corinthian letters, that 2 Corinthians is so different in writing style that I am quite surprised some enterprising scholar doesn't argue that Paul didn't write it. He has clearly been shattered in the exercise of his authority, but is continuing to exercise it through tears and prayers, with warning and irony. He has, of course, no official standing that would give him legal means, in local courts, of forcing his will on the church. He can only use moral persuasion. That puts him in a not dissimilar position to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has no official jurisdiction outside England – and precious little actual executive power here, if it comes to that. I grieve for George Carey; he has been put in a virtually impossible position, where all a bishop's instincts for unity are matched against all a pastor's proper instincts for holiness, but where he is able to act neither as bishop nor as pastor, but only as long distance persuader. [This was of course in summer 2002; the same should now be said of Rowan Williams.] It seems to me that we are being called in our day to rethink, hammer out afresh, what precisely authority consists in, and how it works within a differences of tone and style rather than of theological content, this gives me pause for thought as I reflect, too, on the difficult issues of authority and koinonia that we face in our community today. Let us not imagine that we simply have to quote 1 Corinthians and all will be well. We may have to live through the pain of 2 Corinthians as well.

This leads me, thirdly and finally, to plead with you that in taking a biblical line, as I hope you will in your consultations, you maintain the wisdom of the serpent as well as the innocence of the dove. We cannot and dare not rely on the old shibboleths of Left and Right, of radical and conservative, that we have assumed over the last two centuries. They are breaking down. In particular, I appeal to my American friends to realise the political spectrum within which they live is not the same as the many different ones within which the rest of us live. Do not assume that if you are what is called right-wing on this issue you will be what is called right-wing on everything else too. Do not make this part of a package of issues which will mean that many who might otherwise join with you find they cannot. There is a real danger that if those who campaign on the issue of homosexual behaviour are heard to be also denouncing moves to remit third-world debt, or are known to be staunch opponents of women's ordination, many who are eager to join you on this issue will turn away. As the Lambeth voting figures made clear, there must be many first-world bishops on both sides of the Atlantic who are not hard line right-wingers, who are not 'the usual suspects' on every political issue that comes up, but who are heartland Episcopalians who know in their bones that the gay agenda is leading in the wrong direction and will quietly oppose it. There is such a thing as strident right-wing agenda, and if we tackle this issue as one aspect of that we will lose support, and understandable so.

Instead – I don't want to finish on a negative note, since I've been talking about Paul, who is always positive and always gospel-oriented – I cast my vote for a fresh and biblically based way forward towards a koinonia characterised by faith, in which ethnic distinctions become irrelevant precisely because, together, we are becoming one body, one new humanity, in Christ. Our Communion is at a crisis point which should also be a growth point. We clearly need to learn new things, and like a child growing to adulthood we may have to put away childish things and acquire some more adult ways of going about how we 'do' koinonia. We may have to renounce our somewhat easy-going and informal structures. It is clear that not many people in North America want anyone East of the Atlantic to tell them what they can and cannot do, but they still want to be in Communion with Canterbury, and part of the task of the International Doctrine Commission, which I and others here belong to, is to hammer out what that means. But, as I say, I regard the present crisis, with its various different dimensions, as the kind of thing a Christian must expect from time to time, and must meet with courage, prayer, celebration of the gospel and a holy boldness in going forward to places we may not yet have been. I don't know whether I am optimistic or pessimistic about where we are, and

indeed I think those categories, like left and right in politics, may be far too over-simple. The late great Lesslie Newbigin was once asked whether he was an optimist or a pessimist about the future of the church; and I close with his reply, which I make my own. I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist, he said; Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.