

Living in Love and Faith: A response
“When anecdote trumps analysis”

There is no doubt that we live in a world where opinions about appropriate sexual behaviour are divided. The world is a very different place from what it was even twenty years ago, and many people, especially Christians, struggle to respond wisely. There is also no doubt that those who have experienced same-sex attraction, or other feelings related to the unusual collection of terms known as LGBT+, have found that the response from those who have called themselves Christians, has at times left them feeling unloved and unaccepted.

The *Living in Love and Faith* material is a thorough attempt to ask the very real questions of how the timeless truths of the Christian faith can engage with a world in which attitudes to sex and relationships are fast-changing, in order that we might better relate to people with love and care.

Its production was precipitated by the refusal of General Synod to ‘take note’ of the document GS 2055 ‘Marriage and Same Sex relationships after the shared conversations’ which resulted in the Archbishops expressing the desire to have a ‘Radical new inclusion in the church . . . founded in a proper twenty-first century understanding of being human and of being sexual.’¹

The *Living in Love and Faith* book and course set out to do this, through information and anecdote. The material is divided into five parts, with stories of people’s lived experience separating each of these sections. These ‘encounters,’ as they are called, are also a key part of the course which accompanies the book.

The five parts have the following titles:

- Reflecting: what have we received?
- Paying attention: what is going on?
- Making connections: where are we in God’s story?
- Seeking answers: how do we hear God?
- Conversing: what can we learn from each other?

There is much to commend the material and much which rightly causes Christians to think. The fact that those who are in favour of revision have, in some cases, reacted negatively, shows how this is not simply a veiled way in which to change the Church of England’s position. However, there is at its heart is what seems to me to be a fundamental misunderstanding, generated by the fact that it is ***primarily observational and anecdotal rather than analytical.***

¹ Living in Love and Faith p.1

Whilst the document helpfully speaks of John's Stott's encouragement to engage in 'double-reading,' understanding both the truth of the bible and the culture of the world around, in many ways it fails to do either. In seeking to explain why, it may well be worth looking at how *Living in Love and Faith* relates both to the Bible and culture.

The Bible

It would be wrong to assume that the material does not intend to take the Bible seriously. Right at the outset there is the stated intention to use a model of Theological Reflection based on Richard Hooker's pattern of Scripture, tradition and reason. There is a desire to be "led deeper into the truth about the God we encounter in Scripture."² But there is also an underlying assumption that we are awaiting information to which we do not yet have access:

"Discernment of the mind of Christ necessitates careful, prolonged and deep reflection."³

However, rather than a thorough analysis of the texts in question in order to go deeper into the truth about the God we encounter in Scripture, or looking at the hermeneutical principles we might apply to texts, there is a *description* of the way in which people have understood the Bible, (which is therefore observational rather than analytical). This is perhaps reflected in the title of the fourth part of the book (Seeking answers: how do we hear God?). The result is that throughout the material, although the Bible is used extensively, the whole subject is deemed to be complex and our knowledge of the Bible, provisional.

"Making connections between what we read in the Bible and the questions we bring to it about identity, sexuality and relationships is not a simple matter . . . as with all human understanding, our knowledge of the Bible is provisional and our understanding partial."⁴

That may be the case, and notwithstanding the fact that we are influenced by our context and culture, there is a rich and thorough history of textual analysis which could be accessed, but which is somewhat lacking in *Living in Love and Faith*, not least as evidenced by the very few footnotes which appear in the section relating to the Bible (when compared to others sections).

In contrast, much authority is given to anecdote. The stories are referred to as "The holy ground of people's lives"⁵ even though the meaning of this statement is not explained. The elevation of the self, the inward and the therapeutic is assumed but not analysed. This may be more a reflection on the cultural assumptions of the day (see below) than any articulated

² Living in Love and Faith p.6

³ Living in Love and Faith p.2

⁴ Living in Love and Faith p.40

⁵ Living in Love and Faith p.48

conviction that feelings determine our hermeneutical certainties – but we are still asked to listen to these stories, in order to be “present to one another” so that “in doing so we create space for the work of God’s Spirit.”⁶ As we attend to such listening, we “allow the Holy Spirit to question our assumptions and raise possibilities for what faithfulness can look like.” Stories, we are told have the “potential to transform us”⁷ whatever those stories might be.

This, of course, is a significant and unexplained theological assumption. John 16:5-11 might be a better place to start when seeking to understand what the Spirit will do, but the passage is conspicuous by its absence. Story is now the place in which and through which God is thought to work by his Spirit. The subjective authority of my own experience has become the means by which I determine the meaning of Scripture.

It is also noteworthy that there is not really a clear theology of sin or repentance. Jesus is described as being sent into the world “in love from the source of life to renew and restore all life, all that has been stained by tears and lost in death.”⁸ Likewise, what morality or immortality might be and therefore whether the concept of change in relation to our sexual behaviour might be a fruit of repentance, is not discussed.

Positively, there is a relatively high view of heterosexual marriage, stating that “God’s good gifts of sexual desire and intimacy . . . find their proper place and freest space in marriage”⁹; and helpfully, this is also linked with its eschatological fulfilment:

“In these references to abundance and transformation, the imaging of Christ’s union with the church and the final consummation of God’s purposes for humanity, Scripture speaks of the way in which the marriage of husband and wife signifies God’s relation to the world.”¹⁰

But there is still the assumption that our understanding of the Bible is provisional, couched in the terms of wrestling with these previously understood givens in the light of contemporary culture. And so the question is raised:

“How do we respond to the questions, challenges and alternative interpretations which the received understanding of marriage now faces?”¹¹

Different responses are discussed and cited and the material notes that the model of ‘Pastoral accompaniment’ (which recognises that there is only one place for sexual activity, between a man and a woman in monogamous life-long marriage) is “the current position of the Church

⁶ Living in Love and Faith p.48

⁷ Living in Love and Faith p.49

⁸ Living in Love and Faith p.12

⁹ Living in Love and Faith p.33

¹⁰ Living in Love and Faith p.32

¹¹ Living in Love and Faith p.39

of England”¹². But then it adds the comment that “in most - but not necessarily all – of these churches [the churches which hold to this position], a person seeking to participate in congregational life would not be turned away if they acknowledged to those in a position of responsibility that they identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.”¹³ Here the cultural assumption of our age is again revealed, collapsing practice into identity, without any seeming awareness of the category error it contains – a change from what we might call Biblical anthropology to a secular, therapeutic anthropology. The issue for most orthodox Christians is not identity, but behaviour. Had the Bible section outlined more clearly what it means to be human – and ultimately what we are called to in the New Heaven and the New Earth, these category errors might have been avoided.

In the light of this relative fluidity and the lack of any strong analysis of the different interpretive responses that have been put forward as to what the Bible means, the only option left is to retreat to story and feeling, on the assumption that here is the place where we create space for God’s Spirit to work, for wisdom to be found and for our limited and provisional understanding to find a little more clarity. In the light of this it is inevitable that the question which now faces the Church of England is: “Where the boundaries of acceptable diversity ought to be drawn.”¹⁴ The answer, it seems, is not to be found in the revelation of scripture, but in the fluidity of the lived experience, despite the fact that the stated and agreed position of the Church of England, in common with Christians down the centuries and around the world, is clear.

To understand why we have bought in to that paradigm it may be helpful to look at how the material deals with the issues which relate to culture.

Culture

In *Living in Love and Faith* there is the recognition that:

- A social revolution seems to be taking place in sexual activity and attitudes and in understandings of identity.
- Relationships are changing – singles, number and duration of sexual relationships, marriage, divorce, cohabitation etc.
- Attitudes to sex are changing
- The ways in which society conceives identity are changing

¹² Living in Love and Faith p.134

¹³ Living in Love and Faith p.130

¹⁴ Living in Love and Faith p.137

It rightly asks the question “What challenges do these changes pose to existing teaching and practice?”¹⁵ and recognises that “in our society, equality with regards to sexual orientation is becoming a litmus test for moral competence”¹⁶ (which raises the stakes significantly if we are to bring the gospel to bear on the world around us).

However, central to the cultural observations is an underlying assumption about ‘identity’ without any analysis of what is meant by this. From the first page of the book, this is evident:

“Yet because our love is imperfect, it is often fear that casts out love when we, as individuals and as a church, seek to discern how the church should act on matters that are central to our identity.”¹⁷

In the absence of any analysis as to why perceptions of identity have changed or how the Bible might inform our understanding of identity, we are left in the realm of the subjective and the therapeutic:

“To understand people’s identities, one needs to listen to their stories . . . the word ‘identity’ can be heard as meaning ‘the deepest story that can be told about a person’ . . . we are not trying simply by using the headline ‘identity’ to pre-empt discussion of how much all these different components matter, how they might interact, or what difference they might make.”¹⁸

Here perhaps we get to the heart of the problem with *Living in Love and Faith*. In his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl Trueman observes that:

“The so-called sexual revolution of the last sixty years . . . cannot be properly understood until it is set within the context of a much broader transformation in how society understands the nature of selfhood.”¹⁹

He traces the trajectory of thought over the last few centuries and how we have got to the stage where society accepts and condones language which would not have even made sense to our forebears. Not only have we collapsed preference and feeling into identity, but we have so radically prioritised the subjective that we now translate it into the concrete by conforming an external image to an internal perception, despite the biological realities, only because recent progress in science and technology has made this possible (as least on an observable

¹⁵ Living in Love and Faith p.62

¹⁶ Living in Love and Faith p.136

¹⁷ Living in Love and Faith p.1

¹⁸ Living in Love and Faith p.89

¹⁹ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* p.20

level). The internal has replaced the external, or in the language of Charles Taylor, the poietic view has replaced the mimetic view. Purpose is now created by the individual.²⁰

Without understanding something of the journey which has taken us here, we will not be able to engage in the double reading desired by the *Living in Love and Faith* project.

The paradigm assumed is that identity (by which it frequently means sexual preference) is the location in which we see the work of the Spirit. This is in part why the topic is so emotive and divisive. In her book *Openness Unhindered* Rosaria Butterfield helpfully poses the question “Why is sexual sin so hard to deal with? Because often sexual sin becomes a sin of identity.”²¹ As such, the territory on which this debate is fought is not actually about the Bible, but about how I feel about myself and perceive my identity. Any challenge to that will inevitably be personal and costly, which is exactly what the gospel demands and the Spirit enables.

Such was the experience of Rosaria Butterfield herself, as she realised that “stepping into God’s story means abandoning a deeply held desire to make meaning of our lives on our own terms based on the preciousness of our own feelings.”²² She described the issues relating to identity in this way:

*Being a lesbian was not just a description of the kind of sex I liked to have. Being a lesbian encompassed a whole range of feelings and perception, character qualities and sensibilities. It reflected the depth of my non-sexual friendships and the integrated community I wanted to build with women. Being a lesbian also reflected the kind of professor I was, the classes I taught, the books I read and the dissertations I directed. I was all in. And I was a jumble of emotions because according to the Bible, what I called community, God called idolatry.*²³

So how have we got here? Gabriele Kuby might sound extreme in her observation that “All sexual revolutions in the twentieth century have their spiritual roots in Marxism”²⁴ but many students of culture have made the same observation, tracing a line from Rousseau and Romanticism (which in many ways introduced the inner life of the individual as the determining moral compass in life) to Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx with their history of society as a history of power and oppression, mixed with Freud, “who made plausible the idea that humans, from infancy onwards, are at core sexual beings.”²⁵

²⁰ *Mimetic view* – the world has a given order and a given meaning which human beings discover and to which they conform

Poietic view – the world is raw material out of which means and purpose can be created by the individual.

²¹ Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* p.4

²² Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* p.5

²³ Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* p.24

²⁴ Gabriele Kuby, *The Global Sexual Revolution* p.22

²⁵ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* p.28

Here is where *Living in Love and Faith* fails to engage sufficiently. For if “Understanding the times is a precondition of responding appropriately to the times. And understanding the times requires a knowledge of the history that has led up to the present”²⁶ it would be wise to analyse this significant journey in changing perception and why the world around us thinks as it does. When we do that we discover that “prior to the 19th century category invention of sexual orientation, no-one’s sexual practice or sexual desire prescribed personhood or defined their personal identity.”²⁷

We therefore find ourselves today often operating with the wrong paradigm when engaging with culture. The Bible knows nothing of ‘sexual orientation,’ only behaviour which is either unholy or holy, determined by a right understanding of creation, fall, redemption and fulfilment in the new creation. This Christian anthropology, which determines how Christians should view ‘identity’, is lacking in the vast majority of contemporary discourse and is not at all analysed in *Living in Love and Faith*. Indeed, the material assumes the contemporary understanding of identity without any critical assessment. Hence my comment that the material is largely observational rather than analytical.

We have fallen into the trap again helpfully identified by Rosaria Butterfield:

“How do we make identity out of temptation? By collapsing what tempt you or what trips you up with who you will become . . . God’s revealed purpose for my identity always nails me to the cross.”²⁸

Even commentators who do not profess faith have realised the folly of misunderstanding identity as a means of relating to sexual behaviour:

“One of the few things in his work [the work of David Halperin] that does seem clear is that even Foucault himself seems to have recognised that sexual identity was probably not a wise basis on which to build any formal identity Foucault marvels that our ‘identity’ should now be the source of ‘what was perceived as an obscure and nameless urge.’”²⁹

One particular area in which we see the extent of this paradigm shift is in the chapter on science.

²⁶ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p.31

²⁷ Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* p.97

²⁸ Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*, p.83

²⁹ Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds* p.34

Science

The *Living in Love and Faith* material recognises developments (such as contraception) which have "significantly influenced the social and psychological ways in which human beings behave sexually and how they view their sexuality and sexual relationships."³⁰

It also seeks to be objective in its presentation of scientific understanding. So when discussing the 'Science of Sexual orientation' we read "The conclusion would seem to be that approximately one-third of the variation appears to be due to genetic factors, the rest due to environment."³¹ Journals are cited and reference is made to non-social environmental influences, with hormonal influences exerted upon the foetus in the womb being of particular interest, concluding "It is highly likely that there is some degree of pre-birth biological influence of this kind."

All well and good – an objective, scientific statement, quoting a position paper written by the Royal College of Psychiatrists.³² What is surprising is that this omits other parts of the paper which may be more unsettling to a story-driven culture. For whilst the paper does question the health, validity and effectiveness of therapeutic treatment, it also says:

*It is not the case that sexual orientation is immutable or might not vary to some extent in a person's life. Nevertheless, sexual orientation for most people seems to be set around a point that is largely heterosexual or homosexual. Bisexual people may have a degree of choice in terms of sexual expression in which they can focus on their heterosexual or homosexual side. It is also the case that for people who are unhappy about their sexual orientation – whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual – there may be grounds for exploring therapeutic options to help them live more comfortably with it, reduce their distress and reach a greater degree of acceptance of their sexual orientation.*³³

The fact that this is not cited in *Living in Love and Faith* may be entirely unintentional but it may also arise from the acceptance of the world-view that science can only ever affirm the shift that has gone on in society rather than challenge it.

This is perhaps why Douglas Murray, someone who does not profess faith and would not subscribe to Christian teaching on sexual morality, in commenting the modern-day mindset, wrote:

³⁰ Living in Love and Faith p.103

³¹ Living in Love and Faith p.108

³² Living in Love and Faith, Footnote 151

³³ (https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/PS02_2014.pdf)

*When people come out as gay they are celebrated for having arrived at their natural end-point . . . they have arrived at the place that is natural, right for them to be. But one oddity of this position is that anyone who is gay and then subsequently decides they are straight will be the subject not just of a degree of ostracism and suspicion but widespread doubt that they are being honest about their true selves . . . an object of permanent suspicion.*³⁴

I make no comment about the nature or wisdom of therapy, or the right or wrong response in certain situations (as above) but rather that objective information has the risk of being selected only to conform to the paradigm of story and not to offend – because offence, or rather that which challenges an internal perception of self, is seen as antithetical (and even dangerous) to the paradigm of self which our culture assumes and esteems. It may be inadvertently done in *Living in Love and Faith*, but if so, that highlights how very deep these cultural assumptions have become.

Even mention of Fraternal Birth Order Effect (FBOE) as a non-social cause relating to sexual preference appears selective. The material quotes *The Journal of Theoretical Biology*, from 1997 (Footnote 153) but does not mention a later paper (PNAS January 9, 2018 115 (2) 234-236; first published December 19, 2017)³⁵ which reviews twenty years of such research, and which recognises:

The nature–nurture debate still rages in the minds of many scientists and scholars, despite the consensus that these are complementary rather than mutually exclusive explanations. However, no field of research subject to this debate generates more heated controversies than those probing the proximate causes of sexual orientation, particularly its less-frequent and thus, perhaps, more-perplexing form: homosexuality. Why the obverse questions probing the causes of heterosexuality attracts no attention remains enigmatic. Theories relying mainly on psychological and social mechanisms contend that the newborn is essentially neutral and that sexual orientation develops during infancy and childhood through a variety of socializing influences. In contrast, many scientists are now convinced that biological processes during embryonic and early postnatal life play a major role in the control of sexual orientation . . . While FBO represents the best-documented biological influence on sexual orientation, the underlying mechanisms had remained completely speculative so far . . . perhaps the prenatal/perinatal biological factors do not by themselves determine sexual orientation but interact with specific aspects of the postnatal environment to reveal their full effect.

[The] nature–nurture debate . . . these two approaches to the control of sexual orientation are not mutually exclusive but clearly cooperate to determine the adult phenotype. Adult differences in behavioural or cognitive abilities always result from cooperation between

³⁴ Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds*, p.23

³⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1719534115>

genetic or perinatal biological influences and postnatal experiences. Furthermore . . . these two types of influences are not independent: the exact same postnatal environment of an individual is not shared with anybody, even brothers and sisters. Each individual creates his or her own environment, actively seeking out what interests or pleases him or her and developing related skills or cognitive abilities. Nature and nurture thus cooperate to forge the adult phenotype of each individual and this is probably also true for sexually differentiated traits, such as sexual orientation.

Whilst there is a helpful and welcomed desire to explain why someone might feel what they feel, and to see what biological causes might contribute, the comments made in *Living in Love and Faith* appear not to present a full picture of the possible scientific response, or analyse what we are to make of the scientific information. An anorexic might have a medical condition which can be explained, but the current medical mindset is that it is a condition to be treated because of the mismatch between physical reality and perception. Since Freud and others, it has been regarded as destructive to apply the same mindset to most areas of sexual morality (but not all³⁶). The danger in *Living in Love and Faith* is that it can read as if we were being given information which serves to confirm the stories we hear rather than reading scientific material which might challenge them. It is perhaps the reason why we hear the potential positives in connection with same-sex relationships:

“Studies suggest that same-sex couples are as good at parenting as different-sex couples . . . Offspring affected by associated homophobic stigma had higher rates of behavioural/emotional problems.”³⁷

Whereas areas of scientific finding which might be more challenging, such as those relating to life expectancy, the rate of sexually transmitted diseases, mental illness and, perhaps most pertinent for the discussion amongst Christians, promiscuity, appear not to be discussed in detail.³⁸

My point is neither to condone nor condemn any particular finding or scientific position, but rather to point out that the consistent lens through which material appears to be viewed, whether seeking to understand Scripture or science, is culturally conditioned through the secular paradigms of our age without any analysis of those paradigms, either in the light of

³⁶ There is still a taboo associated with paedophilia, zoophilia and in some areas, polygamy

³⁷ Quote from the Journal of Lesbian Studies 2019, *Living in Love and Faith* p.75

³⁸ Cf. Kuby pp. 146-152

“A 1997 study in Australia of 2583 older men living as homosexuals were asked their lifetime number of sexual contacts. The average number was 251. Only 2.7% of those studied has had just one sex partner in their life. A 2003 study in Amsterdam concluded that partnerships between homosexual men last not longer than an average of 1.5 years. During these partnerships each partner has an average of 12 other sexual partners. More recent studies show lower figures but all confirm that exclusivity is the exception even in stable partnerships.” (Kuby p150).

Scripture, tradition (or even reason), although this is stated at the outset as that which the material aims to do. Instead, we are left with the question:

“In the light of our growing scientific understanding of new possibilities that technology offers, where do people find the wisdom to live well, to live in a way that is faithful to their religious belief while interacting with the social and scientific realities of the world?”³⁹

Christians would perhaps answer that by turning to Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, or to books such as Ecclesiastes, 1 Corinthians and Colossians. And yet, if such conclusions from Scripture do not chime with the lived experience, the *Living in Love and Faith* framework would perhaps assume that we are not listening to the Spirit. If that is the case, then real discussion will be very limited, with personal experience trumping all else – and a personal experience which has the danger of looking very much like its non-Christian counterparts in the world around, which itself is the product of a slowly developing world-view and anthropology which has been formed in contradistinction to Scripture rather than in conformity with it.

It will not be enough to retreat to this new God-of-the-gaps theology. We believe that God has spoken – and still speaks – through his Son, as given in his word. We believe that human identity is not defined by who I want to be, but how I was created and am re-created in Christ, that Spirit-generated holiness is not about being authentic to who I want to be; it is about being conformed to the likeness of Christ. Without recognising that the paradigm within which we are asked to operate is not that which is derived from Scripture and is inconsistent with a transforming view of the Spirit, I fear the Church of England has engaged in a project with laudable motives but without the possibility of a laudable outcome.

That said, I am sure it is right to engage, to repent of error in the past, to love all people as created by God – and to offer the redeeming gospel of the Lord Jesus, in prayerful expectation of the work of Spirit, transforming and conforming our stories to his. But in order to engage well we must do so through a different lens from that which is assumed in *Living in Love and Faith*.

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³⁹ Living in Love and Faith p.120