

# The Blessing of Same Gender Unions and Holy Scripture

Essays written for the Bishop of Niagara  
and as part of a conversation with Anglicans in Tanzania

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## Introduction

Grace and Peace in our Lord Jesus Christ !

We in the Diocese of Niagara are particularly grateful to our Anglican brothers and sisters of the Church of Tanzania for being in dialogue with us and for your interest in continuing the conversation. We are deeply appreciative of the work which you have done in reflecting on and responding to our initial set of papers, and we look forward to a continuing dialogue with you.

We would like to express our clear desire to do the work which is necessary for us all to walk and talk together. We appreciate the deep differences in our cultures, in our experience, and in our churches. But we also know that the importance of our relationship lies in those things which we share in common, rather than in those things in which we differ. Our common faith rests in Jesus, as brought to us in the Holy Scripture, the child of a loving God who redeems us through the sacrifice of the cross and inspires and enlivens us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Just as we in North America hold some narrow and inaccurate views of the Church in Africa (notably that *Africa* could even be considered so monolithic that any one characterization of the Church in that continent could do it justice), so we know that there are certain narrow and inaccurate views of us in North America which interfere with a real and true acknowledgement of each other's views and values. We here have been too guilty of a consumerist and, some would say, populist view of religion and we repent of that, just as we repent of any notion of Africa as being only a colonial Church or of a particular kind of culturally determined faith.

North America has, at times accurately, been characterized as having a superficial materialism at its core; we here who are working on this dialogue acknowledge that accusation and its accuracy for some and in some places. We eschew that characterization of our Church, however. We believe that we are struggling honestly and with integrity, to be the Church which God calls us to be. We do understand how and why we are viewed by some as lacking discipline and as products *only* of our culture, but we want to assure you that we believe ourselves to be different from that rather narrow view.

The Church, throughout its history, has always been deeply imprinted by local culture; indeed, the development of the early church bears strong witness to that fact. So, too, in our Canadian context, just as in your Tanzanian context, it is impossible to sever the church from culture. However, we believe that we

can and do hold to the faith as handed down by our forebears and articulated in our creeds and doctrines. As this set of papers indicates, we enter into theological and ecclesial scholarship and debate seriously and with a commitment to hard work. We also know that wisdom is borne out of this work and the prayers that we offer daily for our Church throughout the world.

We commend this work to you, with deep gratitude for the dialogue which is taking place between us. As one of our group has said, we hope that we can talk to each other and that each can acknowledge that the other is acting in good faith, and not simply in culturally conditioned ways. Ideally, we hope that we can talk to one another and that each of us is changed by that conversation.

In faith,  
Peter Wall

### **Our Common Understanding**

Michael Thompson

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

First, let me thank Hilda Kabia for her response to my paper, “Blessing as Mission”. And then, thank you to all of those who have responded to reflections from the Diocese of Niagara. It is clear that you have taken time to read and to reflect in ways that demonstrate deep roots in the mission realities of your context, and a care to try to understand how realities in our context might be different.

To Hilda, please know that I do not believe that the approach I take will fit into any context. In your response, and elsewhere, I note concern that we might imagine we could or should influence a decision in your diocese and Province. My paper is not an attempt to do that, but to offer a reasoned description of what I believe is at issue in our context here. I know that here in Niagara, as well as in Tanzania, there are those who take a different position. We are learning that while one may not convince another to adopt one’s understanding, it is possible for people who disagree to recognize another’s position as a reasonable way to interpret the interplay of scripture, tradition and reason in seeking a faithful response to God.

As we met and discussed the papers you sent to us, we recognized the centrality of the Bible in shaping the character and decisions of the church and our members. Bishop Mhogolo’s paper is particularly clear and helpful in this regard. In the face of diversity with respect to reason (and the experiences upon which we bring reason to bear) and tradition, he suggests that the only common resource at hand is Scripture, and that “if we can use our different traditions and reasons to study and explore the Scriptures, we can

somehow reach a common understanding and consensus on Christian theology and practice.”

Scripture offers us an alternative story about who we are, about human character and purpose, about the place of brokenness and healing, estrangement and reconciliation, sin and forgiveness in our lives, and about the central character by whose presence, purpose and power healing, reconciliation and forgiveness become possible. Scripture bears vital witness to the presence and purpose of God in the life of the world and in our lives as followers of Jesus.

Moreover, the biblical witness to God’s covenant and God’s Kingdom call into question our allegiance to other kingdoms and our entanglement in other covenants. In particular, the witness of the prophets and Jesus’ proclaiming and enacting of the kingdom of God form the basis for Christian solidarity with God in securing God’s justice and peace in a violent and profoundly unjust world. And in our context, it is the Scriptures that offer us a compelling alternative to a kingdom of entitlement, indifference, rivalry and greed. That alternative – God’s kingdom of justice, compassion and peace, is the basis for partnerships within the Anglican Communion, especially in the face of inequities and injustice by which some benefit at the expense of many. Scripture’s alternative is embodied in baptism, in the renunciations of a broken universe, broken social structures, and misdirected lives and in turning to and accepting Jesus as saving and as worthy of our loyalty and trust. So our baptism, rooted in scripture, offers a compelling alternative to the narratives that dominate our culture with norms of greed, suspicion, exploitation and fear. Scripture offers us knowledge of the world as given and shaped by God’s grace and love, and of ourselves as stewards of the world on behalf of one another, the earth, and the future. The very greeting we use to begin each celebration of the Eucharist – “The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit” – expresses an alternative to the norms of the “ruler of this world”. It is because of scripture that we have, I think, the following things in common:

We have in common the understanding that our participation in God’s mission will mean that we offer both blessing and challenge in response to the cultures, traditions and values that we encounter in any context.

We stand together in recognizing that in order to inhabit the kingdom of God, we will need to turn from – repent of – our entanglement in other kingdoms.

We have in common an understanding that we are partners in a transforming mission that God initiates and invites us to join.

We have in common a sense of our communion because, by grace, we are part of the life and embrace of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus.

We have in common an understanding of human purpose that is found in pursuing justice, peace and dignity.

We have in common God's promise to be faithful to us as we follow Jesus on the way of the cross. And we have in common the resurrection as witness to God's power to overcome death.

And, I think, we have in common our ancestors' witness in Scripture to a God who is both orderly and surprising, who again and again undertakes a new thing, a thing that will make both ears of those who hear it tingle.

It is this last on which we might begin to hear one another in light of the question of whether the blessing of faithful, committed and monogamous relationships between persons of the same sex is a "new thing" that is God's doing, or an innovation contrary to God's purposes, hostile to God's kingdom, and careless of God's covenant with God's church.

We have, in the Diocese of Niagara, come to a decision to live as if such blessings are a godly "new thing". We know that our decision is an unusual one within the Anglican Communion, and one that many find confusing and disturbing. We are grateful for this dialogue as the implications of our new practice become apparent to us, and glad of our companionship in the gospel of Jesus Christ with you and many others around the world.

With thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, we wish you every joy and peace.

## **Word and Sacrament**

Derek Anderson

Are there qualities that mark one interpretation of the Bible as more or less trustworthy than another? Assuming the interpreter has some training in the modern discipline of biblical studies, and assuming that the same interpreter is awake to the risk of bias, is there a way to determine whether her or his reading of the Bible assists the church in hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit? In matters that are not addressed directly in the creedal material that distills the doctrinal core of our faith as Anglicans, what standards are there that will help us to recognize a given interpretation of the Bible as a valid expression of our common faith?

These questions call for reflection on our role as interpreters. As such, I will focus my brief comments on the matter of interpretation itself, without directly addressing what the Bible has to say about human sexuality. I propose two interdependent models for testing our biblical interpretations, both of which follow from our shared experience of the Eucharist in Anglican worship. It is natural to expect our common worship to shed light upon how we are to interpret the Bible. The Anglican tradition, after all, invites us to hold together scripture, tradition (expressed in part in the church's tradition of worship), and reason in our work of discerning our identity as church. The way we encounter God in the Eucharist offers, by analogy, clues to the ways we might expect to hear from God when we read the Bible in Christian community.

The first test of biblical interpretation I propose questions the ability of a given interpretation to promote in the reader love for God and love for neighbour. Our Eucharistic Prayers lead us to expect that, as communicants, we will encounter God's love poured out for the world in Christ in a way that nourishes, forgives, restores, and empowers us to become agents of God's love in the world. The "lift up your hearts" formula at the start of our Eucharistic Prayers offers a clue that, at least in part, the work of the people gathering for the Eucharist is to offer ourselves to be transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit in the community. By analogy, we might expect our biblical readings to bear fruit, not only in deepening our understanding, but also by inviting the church to enter more deeply into the love that God seeks to pour out for the world. I will take my cues for this test from the writings of Saint Augustine who directed biblical interpreters to reject readings of the Scriptures that do not promote love for God and neighbour. Second, the sacrament at the heart of our common worship invites us into an encounter with God that is both personal and communal, a mystery where we encounter the living Christ, but where the full meaning of this encounter is never exhausted by any single linguistic expression. I will suggest that the Bible might hold for us an analogous depth of meaning which resists any claim for the final and certain superiority of any single interpretation. If I am successful in drawing out this analogy between Word and Sacrament in our shared experience of Anglican spirituality, then we may be able to recognize as life-giving the very provisionality of any single way of reading the Bible.

### *Hear, O Israel*

I am the last person who would want to downplay the importance of Christians acquiring biblical knowledge. I trust that it goes without saying that we must bring our best learning to the task of interpreting the Bible. But the work of biblical interpretation in the Christian community is not simply an

intellectual exercise. The church might well expect its biblical interpreters to do more than impart knowledge. In the early centuries of the church's history, there was a clear expectation that the task of reading and understanding the Bible would form the character of the reader. The outcome of reading the Bible was to grow in Christ-likeness.

In what ways might our Bible reading aspire to form the minds *and* the hearts of our church members? How can our practice of interpreting the Bible promote Christ-likeness in our communities? To begin with, I want to look at some of the ways we expect our participation in the Eucharist to be character forming.

In one way or another, all of the Eucharistic Prayers authorized for use in Niagara recognize the communal meal of bread and wine to be a memorial of God's redeeming love at work. Most of the Eucharistic Prayers we use go further, inviting the Holy Spirit to unite participants to Christ's sacrifice so that we, in turn, might receive a share in the life of Christ's resurrection. Usually, the Holy Spirit is invoked in this way near the end of the community's prayer at the table. Drawing upon ancient Eucharistic practice, and insight from Romans 5.5 where the Holy Spirit is identified with the fullness of God's love poured out to transform human hearts, the *epiclesis* invites communicants to become recipients of God's love. Since God's love is always given as well as received (as we learn from theologians reflecting upon what it means for God to be Trinity), communicants are drawn into God's own giving and receiving of love. We may see in this account of Eucharistic theology a way of understanding how communicants are united in the body of Christ: Christians are united to one another in neighbourly love, and united to God through the love which the community as a whole returns to God. In rich and complex ways our Anglican worship invites communicants to receive God's abundant love as we are transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ.

What if the Bible, when read correctly, had a similar influence upon the lives of Christians, guiding us by grace to receive God's love and to become agents of that love in the world? In his book about biblical interpretation, *De doctrina (On Christian Teaching)*, Saint Augustine of Hippo deduces a rule for deciding when to attend to the literal meaning of the biblical text and when the interpreter must search for other, deeper meanings in the text. "So if it seems to you," Augustine writes, "that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this

twin love of God and neighbour, then you have not yet understood them” (1.40). In practice, Augustine’s advice means that, when the literal sense of the Bible cannot be understood to promote love for God and neighbour, the interpreter must search for a metaphorical or spiritual sense from the very same text that promotes twin-love in the reader. Love for God and neighbour is for Augustine, to use a modern phrase, the “deep text” of the Bible.

There are at least two important assumptions that stand behind Augustine’s advice. First, that there is a depth of meaning in the Bible which is not exhausted by the literal meaning of the text. (I will address this assumption more fully in the next section of this essay, where I discuss the provisionality of our biblical interpretations.) Second, that the meaning we are to find in the Scriptures is only partially to be apprehended by our understanding. The meaning of the Bible also entails a gracious and life-long transformation of the reader’s ability to love God and our neighbour. Interpreted in light of the twin-love command, there is a sense in which the Bible “performs” its meaning in the reader, enlightening the mind, *and* training the reader in the school of charity. The African saint advises that wise decisions about when to follow the literal meaning of a biblical text will be guided by the overarching purpose of the Bible itself, which is to invite readers to open themselves to such transformation.

*Do this in remembrance of me*

For Augustine, the meaning of the Bible is realized not only in our understanding but in our renewed ability to love God and neighbour. Is it not implied that we somehow encounter God through this process of transformation? If so, how do we encounter God through the biblical text? In the previous section I mention theologians who reflect upon what it means for God to be Trinity in a positive light: they help us to imagine how human loving can be drawn into the love exchanged eternally among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, the same theologians maintain (somewhat less helpfully) that language itself is ill-suited to describing God, much less mediating an encounter with God. How, then, can the language of the Bible set the scene for us to encounter the living God? To see what sort of interpretation might assist us in such an encounter, I turn again to our experience of the Eucharist.

Much to their credit, Anglicans have been reluctant to specify the means through which Christians encounter Christ in our Eucharistic worship. History shows that the decision not to codify the mode of Christ’s presence in the sacrament was due to heated conflict in the church between seemingly

irreconcilable theological positions. The rival understandings of Eucharistic theology in mid-sixteenth century England insisted, on the one hand, that through the Eucharistic Prayer, the bread and wine were transformed into the real presence of Christ, and, on the other hand, that the Lord's Supper is a memorial of Christ's passion and death where true worshippers encounter Christ by faith. The compromise reflected in the *Book of Common Prayer* adopted language from both sides of the debate so that the Anglican view became a "real partaking" of the body and blood of Christ: the transformative encounter with Christ rests upon the faith of the communicant who partakes of the body and blood of Christ. This amounts to something less literal than the "real presence" doctrine and something more real than the language of a memorial.

Deeply rooted in our shared Anglican tradition is an agreement that we can stand around the same table and believe different things about the kind of encounter we have with the living Christ in the Eucharist. The important matter is not just that an historical compromise was reached that kept the peace in the Church of England. The language adopted by the framers of the Eucharistic Prayers we hold in common is open-ended. It does not shut down conversation by stipulating a single, irrefutable formula representing the way that we encounter Christ in the Eucharist. Rather, by its very open-endedness, the language of the Eucharistic Prayer tells us something about the mysterious depth of God's love which we encounter as communicants. It is mysterious, not in the sense that we cannot know anything about it, but in the sense that its depth fulfils and surpasses our ability to understand. This is how it is possible for people who disagree in matters of Eucharistic theology to be nourished by the same Eucharistic Prayer. The open-endedness of the Prayer directs our attention beyond the words of the Prayer to the realities we are to remember in the Eucharist.

There is a sense in which the language and structure of the Bible points to a similarly mysterious depth of meaning. The Bible, after all, tells many different stories about how humans encounter God, who is both manifest and mysteriously hidden. In his essay, "The Literal Sense of Scripture," Rowan Williams expresses a current in biblical scholarship when he asserts that the Bible does not speak with a single, unambiguous voice. In other words, by the plurality of the stories it tells, the Bible itself invites wide-ranging conversation about its meaning. If there is unity in our proclamation of the Easter mystery, it emerges through counter-claim and debate. If this is so, then we pay a high price if we insist upon shutting down

debate about the meaning of the Gospel in our day. Indeed, such debate appears to make room for the Spirit to move, transforming human participants not simply into uniformity, but into Christ-likeness.

Another mark, then, of an adequate approach to interpreting the Bible will be that the proposed interpretation makes room for plurality and uncertainty. In other words, the outcome of our interpretation must leave room for divine mystery to be expressed. A second test of our biblical interpretations will question the ability of those interpretations to be true to the way the Bible itself points us toward divine mystery. Acceptable interpretations will be aware of the limits of their own ability to claim sole possession of biblical truth. Such interpretations will allow room for other voices to be heard. They will invite, rather than seek to shut down, conversation about the meaning of the Bible.

I hope that reflecting upon our practice of interpreting the Bible will remind us that interpretation is the work of the whole church. In unfolding the meaning of the scriptures the church opens itself to God's self-revelation. This does not always occur through linguistic formulas that require the assent of our faith: it may also occur in practices that form and transform our ability to love God and our neighbour. By exploring analogies between word and sacrament, I hope that we are reminded of just how much we share in common as Anglicans, even though we may not all share identical theologies of human sexuality.

## **Two Studies on the Bible and Homosexuality**

Brian Ruttan

The invitation of our Tanzanian correspondents is to engage in the study and discussion of holy scripture as a way of gaining mutual understanding of the issues surrounding the blessing of same gender unions. The specific passages in the Bible that have been regarded as pertinent to the issue of homosexuality are Genesis 19, (the depravity and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah), Leviticus 18:22,20:13, Deuteronomy 23:17-18 (the anti-homosexual statutes of the Law of Moses) and the New Testament echoes of these passages in Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:8-11 and Jude 7. I have divided my comments into two sections. The first considers God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the primordial stories that surround it in Genesis 17-21. The second study considers the legal injunctions against homosexuality in the Leviticus and Deuteronomy and asks what is the force of these injunctions for Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

## Genesis 17-21

The themes of Genesis chapters 17-21 are fertility (fruitfulness) and ancestry. Ishmael, Abram's son, is born of Sarai's slave Hagar, to Sarai's shame because she has not borne a son. Sarai attempts to have mother and son banished in the desert but they are restored (for the time being) to Abram's household by the intervention of an angel. Abram loves his son Ishmael and God makes promises concerning him:

I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous: he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. (17:21)

This is the beginning of the fulfillment of Abram's fruitfulness promised in Chapter 15.

He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them" Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be". And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. (15:5-6)

The theme of fertility and ancestry is reiterated in chapter 17 as part of God's covenant with the renamed Abraham and Sarah. Abraham's part is to walk before God, and be blameless (17:1). God says,

"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God." (17:4-8)

God promises that Sarah will give birth to Isaac. This reduces Abraham to fits of laughter (17:17) since he is now 100 years old and Sarah is 90. He was only 86 when he sired Ishmael, but in this rarefied primeval atmosphere of fertility, anything can happen. In chapters 18 and 19 there is a wild, ecstatic upheaval connected to the visits to Abraham of "three men" and to Lot of "two angels".

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. (18:1-2)

The three men are the presence of God with Abraham and his household. They are the catalyst for Abraham and Sarah's miraculous conception of their son Isaac the promise of which reduces Sarah in turn to a laughter of disbelief. Abraham serves the visitors a feast of newly baked bread and veal with milk and

curds, (18:6-8) something unthinkable for Jews under the Law.

The three men are also on another mission: judgement and punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah for their grave sins. Because Abraham is now in a new covenant relationship with God, they take him into their confidence about the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-21). We have already seen a hint of Abraham's compassion in his dealing with Ishmael and Hagar despite the shame and anger of Sarai. Here his compassion is for the righteous who will suffer the punishment deserved by the evil doers. Abraham bargains with God for conditions of Sodom and Gomorrah being spared should some righteous men be found there.

The compilers and editors of the sacred texts obviously regarded the "two angels", whom Lot hosts in Sodom, as continuous with the "three men" who stayed with Abraham. While Abraham and Lot recognise the ecstatic holy presence of their visitors, all the men of Sodom and Gomorrah appear to be captivated by a visceral sexual desire for the visitors themselves. They mistake the divine catalyst of fertility and ancestry for an object of their sexual desire. They are captivated by the beauty of the two angels and desire it for themselves. The confusion is a twist on idolatry perhaps reflecting a cult of the phallus.

The men of Sodom clearly are not sexually interested in Lot himself who goes out of his house to plead with them to leave the visitors alone. There is no indication that they are sexually interested in other men such as Lot's sons-in-law. They are clearly not interested in Lot's virgin daughters whom he offers in place of his guests. They are only captivated by the angels and misapprehend the wild, ecstatic upheaval of their presence, not understanding this as a catalyst of fertility and ancestry for God's historical invitation to be fruitful, but rather distorting it into an opportunity for self gratification. It is a gross misunderstanding of the divine invitation.

Their obsession leads to their violent destruction. If their sin, the sin of every man of the "cities of the plain" were homosexuality, then violent destruction would not be necessary. The cities of the plain would fade away of their own accord. The theme of this section of Genesis, after all, is fertility and ancestry. The encounter of the two angels with the men of Sodom is the only one in this section that does not result in fruitfulness and ancestry. I suggest that the condemnation of homosexuality, if it is here at all, is tangential to the main fault of Sodom and Gomorrah which is blind devotion to a cult of sexual self indulgence that is antithetical to the themes of fertility and ancestry central to God's invitation in the Book of Genesis.

Lot and his family, furthermore seem very reluctant to escape the cataclysm that is about to erupt on the cities of the plain. His sons-in-law regard his urgency to prepare to leave the city as a joke. Lot himself argues with his guests about the destination of his escape. Lot's wife, despite warnings not to look back, overcome with loss and nostalgia, did so and was turned to salt. They clearly grieved leaving Sodom and the loss of their community which suggests that they were perhaps not strongly conscious of the depths of its sinfulness and themselves contaminated by it.

When Lot and his daughters arrived in Zoar, they were reduced to living in a cave having lost everything as refugees from Sodom including the prospective sons-in-law. The desperate daughters with no prospects for husbands resort to incest. They bare sons by their father Lot conceived when he was drunk: Moab and Ben-ammi the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites of later history. The theme of fertility and ancestry continues here as a vestige of the mysterious presence that has been a catalyst for these new directions.

The theme of fertility and ancestry is played out in this section of Genesis in many ways. Hagar, Sarai's Egyptian slave, gives birth to Ishmael, Abram's son, as a surrogate. Abraham loves Ishmael but eventually gives in to Sarah who cannot stand his presence alongside her son Isaac. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away to fend for themselves amid assurances that Ishmael will be the ancestor of many nations. Isaac, the direct continuation of Abraham's line, is the result of a miraculous conception when Sarah is 90 years old and Abraham 100. Sodom and Gomorrah miss the divine invitation and are wiped out. Moab and Ben-ammi are born out of incest between Lot and his daughters and they are the fathers of nations as well. Fertility and ancestry have many forms but it is Israel alone that arises miraculously from God where there are no other possibilities.

Finally, Abraham is the only one who really understands the possibilities God presents. The primeval setting is pre-Law indicated by the array of sins committed in a virtual state of nature: Abraham serving veal with curds and milk, Lot's prostituting his virgin daughters, the men of Sodom's confusion of spiritual desire with lust, and Lot's daughters seducing their drunken father into incest. Abraham has compassion for Ishmael and Hagar and attempts to intercede for those caught innocently in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He has a sense of compassion and justice. Only Lot shows any comparable virtue as he honours his guests and their safety above all. However, the implication seems to be that he and his family are contaminated by living in Sodom leading to a distortion of the good in their hearts. This is suggested by

his willingness to sacrifice his daughters, his slowness in leaving Sodom, the ossification of his wife in her remorse, her reluctance to leave, and her disobedience and, finally, the descent into incest in the cave refuge of Lot and his daughters.

In conclusion, careful reading of this section of Genesis (17-21) shows no evidence that “the grave sins” of Sodom and Gomorrah were related to a generalised homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22,20:13, Deuteronomy 23:17-18 and New Testament Echoes: Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:8-11 and Jude 7.

Let us step back to consider the status of the Law of Moses for Christians. The issue hinges on a central teaching of the Church on the relationship of God to humanity. In St Paul’s terms it is this: we are justified in relation to God by, and only by, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, human beings are reconciled to God who, as a result, accepts men and women as adopted children. Furthermore, we are accepted unconditionally. Nothing we can do or anyone else can do can alter this acceptance (Romans 8:31-39).

Some have concluded that this unconditional acceptance on the basis of divine grace makes the Law of Moses redundant. It is clear, though, that St Paul does not share this view. Frequently, he reminds his correspondents of elements drawn from the law that he expects Christians to observe. In Romans 6:9-10, a particularly strong example, Paul writes that sinners (fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers ...) will be excluded from the kingdom of God ! This is a dramatic contrast, if not a contradiction, of what is to follow in chapter 8. Prior to this (5:9-13), the instruction is to “drive out” (NRSV) those within the Christian community who practice sexual immorality. In Colossians 3:5-11, the instruction is to “put to death” in ourselves a list of sins since the “wrath of God is coming on all who are disobedient”. 1 Timothy 1:8-11 includes another list of sins distilled from the law,

... the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father and mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers,...

On the one hand, justification through grace alone is the core of the unconditional new covenant between God and all of humanity. On the other hand, the Law of Moses remains in force as a guide to right

behaviour and order within the new Christian communities.

A key element in understanding the status of the Law for Christians may be found in 1 Corinthians 6:12. Here St Paul writes, “All things are lawful for me but not all things are beneficial, I will not be dominated by anything.” He reiterates this theme in his discussion of the problem of consuming food previously offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8). He concludes that there is nothing unlawful about consuming food previously offered to idols except the possibility of giving “weak believers” the wrong impression, that is they might conclude there is some spiritual benefit in eating such food.

St Paul is concerned about how the wider society regards the fledgeling Christian communities. He wants to minimize any risk of Christians being perceived as a threat to the fabric of Greco-Roman culture. For instance, he encourages obedience to civil authorities on the grounds that God is the source of all temporal authority and civic leaders hold their position because of God (Romans 13). St Paul also encourages Christians to follow the Roman domestic code of family life (1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Colossians 3:18-25).

The Roman domestic code is comprised of the formal and informal rules that governed family life in Greco-Roman culture of the first century. St Paul upholds these rules explicitly, including slavery, while sacralizing them with reference to Christ’s headship of the Church and his love and care for the Church as an analogy of fatherhood in a human family. There is also supporting reference in these passages to the Law (Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16).

It cannot escape notice that there is a stark contrast between these domestic provisions and St Paul’s statement of the new reality of the Gospel: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> (Galatian 3:28).

Upholding the Roman domestic code was part of St Paul’s attempt to accommodate the Christian community to its culture so that it might continue to live and worship undisturbed. In doing this, a wide gap is opened between the teaching of the gospel within the Christian fold and the means of

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth treatment of Galatians 3:28 in St Paul’s letters see Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory Of Her*. (1983), Chapter 6.

accommodating to the culture.

The new covenant forged by the grace of God in Jesus Christ is eternal and unconditional. The witness of St Paul particularly in the letters to the Galatians and Romans makes this point clear. This teaching has become central to the church's understanding of the human relationship to God. It is the kingpin of the church's teaching about salvation. The new covenant represents an expansion of the first covenant forged by God with Abraham, to include all of humanity. In other respects it has the same form: it is eternal and unconditional (Genesis 15:5-6, 17:1-8). The divine gift of the first covenant includes the promise of the land of Canaan and the promise of fertility - Abraham will be "the father of many nations". The sign of the covenant is circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14). The new Christian covenant is the unconditional acceptance of all humanity as children of God through the work of Jesus Christ. It is confirmed by Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27, 16:5-15, Acts 2:1-13) "to guide [the church] into all truth".

In neither covenant is the function of law to provide a condition for acceptability to God. Both covenants grant unconditional acceptance and nothing else is required for justification before God. Law functions, for the justified, as a guide to behaviour, a key to identity as God's people and, in the case of the churches who looked to St Paul for guidance, guidelines for living in harmony within the cultures of their home cities in the Roman Empire. Law has an additional spiritual function which is to be a behavioural touchstone for God's presence in the everyday life of the believer. Observance of the Law is to do God's will, to be in tune with God, to be on the path of sanctification.

That said, it is a complex matter to assess how the Law of Moses should be observed. The Pharisees of the New Testament are portrayed as seeking to justify themselves before God by observance of the Law. In the dispensation of the Abrahamic covenant this was neither necessary, possible nor beneficial as Jesus himself pointed out repeatedly. Such aspiration was a breeding ground for rigidity, perfectionism and hypocrisy.

The New Testament summary of the Law as love of God with all our being and our neighbour as

ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28), distills the spirit of the Law.<sup>2</sup> St Paul points out that observance of the letter of the law easily loses sight of this spirit of love, which is its true meaning (2 Corinthians 3:6). The spirit of the Law is also given in a passage such as Galatians 3:19-29 where the “clothing” of the love of Christ creates a unity that dissolves all human social distinctions. The passage culminates in the following declaration which we quote again more fully:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

The spirit of the Law reveals the covenant of freedom in which the old orders and divisions have evaporated.

The Church decided early that a good deal of the Law governing ritual and diet was an encumbrance. The point, they understood, was not to make gentile converts submit to circumcision and an elaborate system of dietary rules (Romans 2:25-31, 2:11, Acts 10:9-16). The point was to introduce them into the company of the body of Christ and its freedom without unnecessary conditions that may be barriers to their salvation. The Law based rules of conduct for Christians were, however, held strongly. As we have seen, these rules of conduct were upheld for reasons of internal harmony, and social propriety for the sake of peaceful coexistence with the Greco-Roman culture. St Paul’s upholding of the Roman domestic code including his decision to tolerate slavery (Philemon) and his direction concerning obedience to civil authorities are actually and potentially contrary to the freedom of the new covenant. Allowing and affirming such distinctions obviously opposed to the spirit of the Gospel, can only be regarded as a protective measure in an already dangerous situation.

If this bifurcated observance of God’s Law is reasonable or understandable for St Paul and his correspondents, does it help us clarify what elements of the Law we choose to follow and which not? Let us first acknowledge that the church has always made selections of which aspects of the Law of Moses are beneficial to us and which not. As already noted, Christians abandoned early on the laws governing diet

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<sup>2</sup> See Derek Anderson’s essay in this collection.

and ritual cleanliness and stopped requiring a physical circumcision as a sign of membership in the covenant people. There is no evidence that the jubilee year was ever actually enacted (Leviticus 25:8-17). Laws prohibiting lending of money at interest were upheld in Europe through the Middle Ages but gave way to the need for capital to underwrite economic expansion beyond the local village marketplace. Women are no longer sequestered during their menstrual period (Leviticus 15:19 ff). There are numerous laws concerned with not mixing species that we routinely ignore: not wearing clothing appropriate to the opposite gender, not sowing two kinds of seed in the same field, not ploughing with different kinds of animals, and not weaving with wool and linen together (Leviticus 22:5-11).

The foundational laws, the ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-17, Deuteronomy 5:6-21), give the basis of religious and social practices for Jews and Christians. The summary of the Law in terms of love of God and neighbour provides focus and direction. But the detail of the Law of Moses belongs to an ancient culture whose way of life is long past. Life was fragile and the Law was directed at survival of a distinctive people in a dangerous environment. What we have tended to retain has been the law concerning sexual relations. In the ancient world these rules were intermingled with property rights, ancestry, and maximizing fertility and survival (Deuteronomy 22:13-30), none of which concerns us much in the present day in which women and men are free individuals each able to enter into covenants and contracts independently. It is true that we continue to regard uncommitted sex as regrettable but not because of a violation of rights. Rather, we regard them as fractures in human covenant relationships and forms of self alienation. We regard rape (Deuteronomy 22:23-29) as a crime of violence for which the victim is never responsible and prostitution as a basic form of human alienation and exploitation.

We are now more concerned with preventing sexual transmission of disease and the misuse of power in sexual relationships. In a post-tribal world ancestry and legacy are waning concerns. A dramatic increase in life expectancy and a decrease in infant mortality have largely eliminated our anxiety about fertility and survival.

The way Christian communities accommodate to their cultures changes with the culture. The stark contradiction inherent in St Paul's accommodation to Greco-Roman culture in the first century is not going to apply to the cultural environments of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, or 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is, however, easy to mistake advice particular to a specific culture as universally applicable because it is in the Bible. Through the centuries, the expansion of the church to places with radically different cultural assumptions to those

of St Paul's era and location, has most often been accompanied by enforcing the Roman family model as *the* form of the Christian family. As we see now, this is a misunderstanding of St Paul's advice which was directed to a particular Christian community in its attempt to accommodate to a specific cultural milieu.

In conclusion: along with the central and amazing grace of justification through the work of Christ, is the spirit of the Law: to love God with all our being and our neighbours as ourselves. The force of the Law of Moses is the law of love. St Paul tells the Corinthians, "all things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial." (1 Corinthians 6:12). What are beneficial are acts of love. Our challenge, which we take up gladly with a sense of freedom and deep responsibility, is to work out what is beneficial for Christian communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and not to revert slavishly to St Paul's directions for what was beneficial for Christian communities in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. As the people of God, it is our responsibility to work out what is beneficial and what is harmful. It is not an option to stop our investigation with the advice St Paul offered to the churches of the Greco-Roman culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

As redeemed people of the Diocese of Niagara, we understand that homosexuality is not harmful to the individual or to the society. The inclusion of people with a homosexual orientation is beneficial to Christian communities. Finally, we understand that blessing permanent same gender unions and honouring the family life that ensues is a celebration of God's grace and love among us<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Thompson's essay in our previous collection.