

## IDENTITY AND REDEMPTION

Michael Bourke (Bishop of Wolverhampton 1993-2006)

This essay focuses on two areas central to the current debate in the Anglican Communion about homosexuality: 'identity' and 'nature'. It follows traditional methods of biblical interpretation, rather than attending to the broader social, scientific, and legal context which contributes to our understanding. Nevertheless the Church has work to do on the specifically theological perspective which it must adopt. This paper argues for a biblical model of redemption that moves towards acceptance of all relationships based on covenantal faithfulness.

### Human identity in Christ

There is no better place to begin a theological consideration of sexual identity than the St Andrew's Day Statement, crafted by eminent theologians in 1995 in response to a request by the Church of England Evangelical Council. The Statement is intended, not as a comprehensive treatise on homosexuality, but as a framework of basic theological principles by which the subject must be approached in order to remain within Christian orthodoxy. It aims *"to find in the Gospel a starting point of common faith from which those who differ can agree to proceed."* Both the clarity and the generosity of this invitation are to be welcomed. In engaging critically with the Statement in this spirit, it would be helpful to know how far those entering the lists on the conservative side identify themselves with its theological position.

The Statement's theological foundations include the following thesis about human nature and identity: *"In Christ we know both God and human nature as they truly are. There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality in Christ. We must be on guard, therefore, against constructing any other ground for our identities than the redeemed humanity given us in him. Those who understand themselves as homosexuals, no more and no less than those who do not, are liable to false understandings based on family or personal histories, emotional dispositions, social settings, and solidarities formed by common experiences or ambitions. Our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race or nationality. At the deepest ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as 'a' homosexual or 'a' heterosexual; there are human beings, male or female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation"*

There is much here with which we can agree. The core identity which we all share is our humanity, created and redeemed in Christ. Our various sexualities are not the most important part of our human identity, and the laudable attempt of Western culture to be more open and mature about sex can easily be corrupted into a consumerist over-sexualisation of the whole of life, which needs to be resisted. Further, sexual identity alone is not enough to justify sexual activity; we have to face the possibility of tragic sexual identities such as paedophilia, which offer no possibility of expression without the abuse of power and trust (an issue searchingly addressed, and contrasted with homosexuality, in the film *Priest*). We can also agree that all sexuality - gay, straight or bisexual, 'normal' or minority, male and female - shares in the fallenness of the world, and needs redeeming. Our fundamental need as human beings is to be found by God and to find our true selves in relationship with God, to be freed from various forms of slavery and idolatry to love God with all our heart, mind and strength. Most importantly, we can agree that the question of sexuality must be evaluated from 'a starting point of common faith in the Gospel', and the following exploration of the central Gospel message of redemption is an attempt to do this.

So far, the St Andrew's Day Statement is helpful and uncontroversial. But what is involved in redeeming our identities? The question affects far more than sexuality; it is about the relationship between nature

and grace. A number of matters require further analysis.

First, the Statement implies different levels of human identity: 'the deepest ontological level' and identities based on sexual affections, class, race or nationality. But instead of clarifying the relationship between them, the Statement seems to deny that the less profound identities have any substance or relevance: "*there can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality in Christ...which can define who we are*".

The authors' concern is rightly to emphasize that all experience is interpreted experience, and the identities we grow up with are, partly at least, the product of various cultural influences on our developing imagination. We must be on our guard against the idolatrous tendency of these cultural pressures, and refuse to ascribe any kind of *final or absolute* status to identities based on sexual affections, class, race, etc. The Gospel of Jesus Christ reveals that there is much more to us than we think.

But does that mean that these lesser human identities have *no* theological significance or reality in Christ, except in illustrating our sinful idolatry? Is this what St Paul means when he says that in Christ "*there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3.28)? St Paul cannot be denying the continuing existence and reality of these distinct identities, since the duties assigned to them in the ethical sections of his letters imply that they are valued positively. And far from homogenising Jews and Gentiles into a 'third race', his vision of God's purpose in history in Romans 9-11 depends on the enduring distinction between them. Indeed, the St Andrew's Day Statement itself seems to accept at least male and female identities as belonging to 'the deepest ontological level', despite the apparent contradiction with St Paul's words.

St Paul's central theological concern is surely to undermine '*boasting*', which means relying on a particular identity - Jewish, male, free - to create a sense of privilege or merit in relation to God and superiority in relation to other people - Gentile, female, slave (for the key significance of 'boasting' in Pauline theology see Romans 2.17f,3.27f,4.2f; 1 Corinthians 1.26-31; Galatians 6.14f; Philippians 3.3-11). The Gospel creates a new equality based on grace and faith; distinct identities are a valid part of the new humanity in Christ provided they are not used to 'boast'. The question about sexuality, therefore, is whether it constitutes a type of human identity alongside others, to be evaluated by the criterion of 'boasting'.

### **Nature and grace: two models of redemption**

A second, related issue concerns the old, unresolved disagreement between two models of redemption, both of which can claim support in the Bible. One model has a strong sense of the *opposition* between the First Adam and Christ the Second Adam, the old humanity and the new, and the need for us to *die* to our old natures and identities in order to put on Christ. The other model emphasises the Resurrection, and the *continuity* between the old nature and the new, summed up in the words: *Gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam* - 'grace does not take away nature, but perfects it'.

The negative evaluation of social, racial and sexual identities in the St Andrew's Day Statement represents a coherent theological position, but it evidently reflects the first rather than the second model of redemption. The argument of this paper is that the second model has an equal claim to biblical support, and therefore to an honourable place within Anglicanism as '*a starting point of common faith from which those who differ can agree to proceed*'. This means that the issue of sexuality cannot be closed off by assuming the model implicit in the St Andrew's Day Statement to be the only valid one.

The second model also takes seriously the disorder of sin and the need for us to die and rise again in Christ: the word 'perfects' means not simply adding a final polish to a nature brim-full of original blessing, but radically renewing it by bringing it into relation with the purifying action of God the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, what is redeemed *is our human nature*, just as the resurrected body of the Lord is not a different body, but the transformed body of the Word made flesh, crucified and buried (note how the verbs in 1 Corinthians 15.3-4 - *died, was buried, was raised* - all have the same subject, underlining continuity). In principle, therefore, the 'redeemed humanity in Christ' does not necessarily cancel out or override the self-awareness we have grown up with, and the cultural and sexual roles with which we have identified ourselves. These diverse expressions of humanity are part of our created nature, the ways in which God has shaped us. Each of us is accepted *'just as I am'*, and we take our identities with us in our relationship with Christ, to be healed and transformed as we journey with him, *'changed from glory into glory'*. True, *'in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage'* (Matthew 22.30), but in this world we are made ready for the new creation by faithfulness in small things (Luke 16.10-11), by becoming better parents, workers and lovers rather than by neglecting such roles. Some people receive a vocation to 'forsake everything' as a sign of the Kingdom, but that is the exception rather than the norm.

It may be helpful to test this second model of redemption by comparing sexuality with another marker of human identity: language. This is not directly referred to in the St Andrew's Day Statement, though it is of course closely related to race and nationality.

### **Identity and language**

Language is by any account a central characteristic of human beings. In his *Confessions* St Augustine of Hippo explores the process by which an inarticulate infant becomes a child who can speak. As an infant *"I would express the thoughts of my heart by various kinds of noise and complaints and motions"*. Gradually he learned to express himself in language: *"I began to observe with my memory when my elders called any thing by a certain name... And having tamed my mouth to pronounce them, I expressed myself by these means... with the people I lived among"*. Thus we learn our *'mother tongue'*. This first language is a particular cultural expression of the deep and universal desire, present in infancy, to communicate. These particular languages are diverse and constantly evolving; some grow in dominance and others become extinct. Our identity is determined by this diversity in some detail: people not only have a 'native language', but the way they speak it defines which country and region they live in, which class they belong to, and how refined or vulgar they are.

The analogy between language and sexuality is instructive. Both are forms of human self-expression, the will to communicate and be understood, to give and receive. We do not have to embrace Sigmund Freud's Oedipal theories, or genetic explanations of sexuality, to locate the emergence of basic sexual orientation in infancy (like St Augustine's 'various kinds of noise and complaints and motions'), and to see the ways in which that orientation manifests itself as a culturally conditioned expression akin to the mother tongue. Most people experience their sexual identity as having been 'given' to them in such a way: if our mother tongue is regarded as a legitimate part of our identity, *a fortiori* the same goes for our sexuality, which is much more difficult (if not impossible) to re-orientate than learning other languages.

This is, of course, open to the criticism made in the St Andrew's Day Statement that these interpretations of our identity are liable to self-deception, cultural bias and false understandings. However, Christians need to make such criticisms with caution and humility, for a number of reasons.

The first is rooted in our analogy. Our linguistic identity is partly defined by the awareness of what we are *not*. Our difficulty in understanding other languages makes us feel helpless and bewildered among

foreigners. We are 'us' and not 'them', and invent derogatory words to define those who do not share our language: the Greeks referred to all non-Greek speaking peoples as 'barbarians' (from 'bar bar'), and the Germanic peoples (including the English) use words related to 'Welsh' to describe those over the linguistic boundary. Those who are different seem threatening, and we create a vocabulary of insult to distance them. Hostility towards sexual minorities and attempts to deny, punish or eradicate their identity also have a linguistic counterpart. Some dominant cultures have systematically tried to eradicate a people's language in favour of the language of their oppressors. Linguistic cleansing of this kind was once the official policy of the British in Ireland and (less effectively) in Wales. Education was its instrument and children its main victims: forced to speak English in school, they were ridiculed and punished for using their mother tongue. Another example is what happened to slaves: those transported across the Atlantic lost their languages and their names along with all other markers of their native identity, and learned to communicate in pidgin versions of their masters' Portuguese, Spanish or English. Christians who deny people's perception of their own sexuality need to consider whether they may be in danger of repeating these historical crimes.

The second reason for humility is that for many centuries in predominantly Christian countries the Church, backed by the criminal law, had a cultural monopoly in defining people's sexuality; this was often accompanied by shameful cruelty, and the vocabulary of 'unnatural perversion' belongs in this context. It is only very recently that individuals have been able to speak for themselves about their sexual identities, and religious attacks on the modern culture of 'freedom' and 'choice' can sound suspiciously like frustration at the loss of totalitarian control.

Thirdly, the argument that modern culture encourages people to think of themselves as having a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity is unconvincing. People with these orientations struggle from their early years with an overwhelming cultural pressure from their families, schoolmates, the media and popular prejudice, let alone religious teaching, to conform to the heterosexual norm, leading not infrequently to depression or even suicide. One of the factors which has contributed to the climate of greater tolerance is people's admiration for the sheer courage with which sexual minorities have 'come out' in defiance of these disadvantages. These deeply personal battles with the prevailing culture testify for rather than against the reality of minority sexual identities. The St Andrew's Day Statement acknowledges that the Church must be open to empirical observation; one wonders how much evidence God must place before us before we accept that a person's sexuality is part of their identity and not an illusion. The Church needs to recognise these factors generously, instead of adopting the role of a cultural victim when its views no longer enjoy general consent.

To return to our theme of models of redemption: in theological terms language is *God given*, part of the created order and an aspect of the divine image in which we are made, an echo of the Divine Word. But language is also *fallen*, a source of conflict and oppression, part of the sinful order which needs redeeming. "*With the tongue we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in God's likeness. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing*" (James 3.6-10). The analogy between language and sexuality has, of course, its limitations; but a similar potential for good and evil applies in all, not just some, sexualities, as it does in all languages. To locate the origins of sexual identity within infancy does not guarantee innocence: St Augustine discerned the stirrings of evil as well as good in his infant 'noises, complaints and motions'. If, then, our linguistic and our sexual identities share the ambiguity of being both God-given and fallen, what can we discover about the redemption of sexuality from the way in which the Bible describes the redemption of language?

## **The Redemption of Language**

The Bible deals with this question in two stories: the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and the Day of

Pentecost (Acts 2). The story of the Tower of Babel is the culmination of the 'primeval history' of the Genesis, describing the origins of creation, humanity and the mystery of good and evil. The Fall, beginning with Adam and Eve and the murder of Abel, reaches its high point in the Flood and the idolatrous ambition to build a tower reaching heaven.

Like the narratives of the origin of species in Genesis 1 and 2, the story should not be read as a scientific or historical explanation of linguistic diversity. In modern understanding the proliferation of languages is a natural phenomenon. The value of the passage lies in the fact that it is *a story*, giving imaginative religious expression to the moral ambiguity of language. The story must be read within this understanding of its theological character.

In terms of the story, then, God responds to the people's arrogance by confusing their languages so that communication breaks down and they cannot co-operate; Babel equals Babylon, 'babble' being the Hebrew equivalent of 'bar bar' (Genesis 11.9). Up to this point, "*the whole earth had one language and the same words*" (11.1) - a reflection of the distinctive Hebrew belief that there is only one God and therefore the human race is one. The fact of linguistic diversity is seen as intrinsically disordered, an evil not intended by God as part of our created nature. God "*scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth*" as a punishment for idolatrous pride. There is a striking similarity with St Paul's description of diverse sexuality in Romans 1.26ff: diversity is not part of our God-given nature, but a disorder to which God has 'given us up' as a punishment for pride and idolatry.

In the early modern period speculation about the 'original' language played a significant role in the history of linguistics. On the scientific level, tracing the various language families 'back' raised the possibility that they may have diverged from a common original, even though there was little prospect of reconstructing it. Theologians were interested in the idea of a sacred language which human beings spoke until Babel, a 'language of heaven' which we shall learn again as part of our redemption. Some claimed that the sacred language must be Hebrew, since this is the first language of Scripture in which God spoke to Abraham and Moses. In mediaeval western Europe the idea grew up that the language of heaven must be Latin, since this was used in the Church's worship, as well as providing a common language in which people of the many different barbarian vernaculars could communicate with one another. Whatever the details, the point was that the redeemed humanity in Christ required learning a new language to replace our defective vernacular identities.

Yet this is not how we see the fallen and divisive nature of language being redeemed on the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit of God comes upon the Apostles 'like *tongues* of flame', with immediate linguistic consequences: they begin to speak in the vernaculars of the cosmopolitan crowd, who hear the wonderful works of God '*each in their own language*' (Acts 2.1-11). The divine Word, the 'language of heaven', is heard in and through the existing, 'fallen', post-Babel languages, which acquire a new sacramental instrumentality. The Holy Spirit does not override the diverse linguistic identities of the Pentecost crowds. Instead, they are given a new ability to communicate and understand one another. The new Christian community is not uniform, but a communion of diversity.

It is true that, in St Paul's letters, the 'gift of tongues' takes a different form from that of Pentecost. In the Pauline Churches it is a new, unknown language which some believers speak 'in the Spirit' - a 'language of heaven' indeed. But St Paul insists on the principle of intelligibility: the gift of tongues is for some, but the interpretation of tongues into the enduring vernaculars is also a gift of the Spirit, essential for the faith of everyone (1 Corinthians 14.1-19).

The Book of Revelation tells the same story, for in its vision of heaven the redeemed praise God in all the languages of the globe: "*a great multitude which no-one could number, from all tribes and peoples*

*and tongues*” (Revelation 7.9-10). They sing a new song, but not in a new language. Redemption does not erase their linguistic identities, but takes them up into the praise of God. *Gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam*.

The translation of the Bible and liturgy into the vernacular by the Churches of the Reformation was a radical theological affirmation of this model of redemption. The languages of the people, despite being (in the terms of the Babel story) ‘fallen’ and disordered, became the preferred vehicle of God’s Word. The English Authorised (or ‘King James’) Version of the Bible claimed to be not only as good as, but better than Jerome’s Latin Bible, being “*newly translated out of the Original Tongues*“, thanks to the labours of Erasmus and other Renaissance scholars on the Hebrew and Greek texts. In the light of Pentecost, the vulgar tongue was not so vulgar after all.

There is a further respect in which identities like race, language, gender and sexuality play a greater part in the redeemed humanity in Christ than the St Andrew’s Day Statement envisages. God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’ means that salvation comes in different ways to different groups of people. As Our Lady sings in the Magnificat, the proud and mighty are put down, and the humble and meek exalted. We know from historical experience that linguistic, cultural and other identities are especially important to communities under threat. To assert their identity is to claim human dignity, liberation and equality in relation to those who have power. Vulnerable identities are strengthened, not eroded, by the work of grace. The historical movements for the emancipation of slaves, women and racially and economically oppressed peoples appealed to the biblical message of the Exodus and the Gospel of redemption (the ‘Song of Moses and the Lamb’ - Revelation 15.3). It is difficult to see any essential difference between those struggles, and that of sexual minorities for the recognition of their identities in today’s Church.

## **Identity and Nature**

*Gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam*. Whether homosexual identity can, like its linguistic counterpart, find a legitimate place in the redeemed humanity depends, of course, on what is meant by ‘nature’. It is the contention of conservative theologians that homosexuality is *unnatural*, and therefore grace cannot ‘perfect’ it. To deal with this argument we must look further into Romans 1.26-27, the key text about homosexuality.

As we have already seen, the passage describes homosexual activity not so much as a sin as a punishment: because of the basic sin of idolatry (“*Exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator*”) God gave them up to sexual and moral confusion, just as at Babel he gave them up to linguistic confusion. Hence they forsake *την φυσικην χρησην* (‘the natural use’, ie natural sex) for what is *παρα φυσιν* (contrary to nature).

The most straightforward reading of this is that Paul assumes all women and men to be ‘by nature’ heterosexual, and that homosexuality is the result of people *forsaking* what is natural to them as a form of rebellion against God. This implies a deliberate choice on the part of individuals, as the human counterpart of God ‘giving them up’. In other words, there is no such thing as a homosexual nature or identity, but only homosexual acts committed by people perverting their heterosexual nature.

This may accurately describe common sexual practice in the ancient world as St Paul knew it, and also some forms of behaviour today. But it is not what is meant by sexual *orientation* as we now understand it, which emerges in early life, as we have seen. If homosexuality does not involve deliberately *forsaking* a heterosexual nature, the condemnations of this text would not seem to apply.

An alternative interpretation of 'nature' is to emphasise not the nature or identity of individuals, but the nature of the world as created by God. According to Genesis 1 and 2 God created human beings as male and female, called to live in biological and psychological complementarity, and to be fruitful and multiply. The procreative role of the sexes is an aspect of being made 'in the image' of the Creator. Accordingly, what is 'natural' for human beings is not what individuals may feel to be natural, but what is in accordance with God's intention for humanity as a whole. Underlying Romans 1 is Genesis 1 and 2, with the 'one flesh' of monogamous marriage as one of the fundamental Orders of Creation. Homosexuality, whether voluntary or not, is 'unnatural' in the sense of a departure from this norm.

This interpretation of St Paul's concept of 'nature' may indeed be right, but if so, the consequences are more drastic than Anglicans usually envisage. Genesis 1 and 2 emphasise heterosexual marriage because of the central place of *procreation*, especially at the beginning of the human race. If creation is to flourish, humans must be fruitful and multiply. Anglicans forget how closely homosexuality has been associated down the Christian centuries with discussions about contraception. Those who see themselves as traditionalists, and who threaten the unity of the Anglican Communion over homosexuality, do well to remember that contraception was universally regarded as 'unnatural vice' until the Lambeth Conferences of the mid-twentieth century, on the grounds that sexual activity must 'by nature' (in God's intention) be open to the possibility of transmitting new life. This interpretation is, of course, still the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. In so far as Romans 1 condemns homosexuality as 'unnatural' on the basis of the creation narratives, it also implies the condemnation of contraception. The Anglican view changed, first because (following the Puritans!) the relational aspect of sex ("*It is not good for the man to be alone*" - Genesis 2.18) was recognised as being of equal importance to procreation; and secondly because the Anglican bishops and clergy, being mostly married, knew better than the Roman clergy what marriage is actually like, and allowed their experience to inform their interpretation.

In a broad historical and ecumenical context, the issue of homosexuality will surely be seen as a footnote to the question of contraception. On what grounds can faithful but non-procreative sex be allowed to the heterosexual majority, but denied to the homosexual minority? The present controversy means either that the current Anglican position regarding contraception is unravelling, and St Paul's concept of 'nature' is directing us back towards the earlier orthodoxy (which has the merit of being equally counter-cultural and tough on everybody); or that we should have the courage of our convictions, and develop the relational ethic to affirm and include as 'natural' sexual identities capable of expressing mutual love and faithfulness. To deny the possibility of responsible, loving and sexually active partnerships to small sexual minorities while liberalising the lives of the majority by allowing contraception, divorce and remarriage (even for the clergy!) is neither consistent nor just.

It is perhaps not surprising that the historic Churches of the Reformation, with their memories of the battles over the vernacular and contraception, should currently be more hospitable than other Christian confessions to the possibility of accepting homosexual partnerships. For if, by analogy with language, homosexual orientation is a marker of identity, then redemption means that it can be accepted and blessed by God, *even if in biblical terms it is a disorder not intended by God in creation*. The matter is to be decided by appeal, not to individual biblical texts, but to the overall pattern of biblical theology. The test for homosexual partnerships is not whether they conform to some ideal 'Order of Creation', but whether they can express the covenantal faithfulness of God without 'boasting', and bring forth the fruits of the Spirit.

The purpose of this essay is not to argue that 'everything goes' in a Christian sexual ethic, and there are no lines to be drawn. It is rather to suggest that the divide has been put in the wrong place. There are three alternative boundaries: (a) anything which prevents procreation within marriage is wrong (the

traditional consensus, still upheld by Rome); (b) contraception is acceptable, but any sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage is wrong, including homosexuality (the present Anglican position); (c) relationships of covenantal faithfulness can be affirmed (allowing committed homosexual partnerships but excluding paedophilia and promiscuity). This essay has argued that, on the basis of a biblical theology of redemption, position (b) is the least persuasive of the three. Having already departed from the traditional teaching of position (a) by accepting contraception, the Anglican Communion ought at the very least to recognise the third option as a legitimate Christian conviction which should not divide the Church.