



Marriage, Family and Relationships

Biblical, doctrinal and
contemporary perspectives

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APOLLOS (an imprint of Inter-Varsity Press)
36 Causton Street, London SW1P 4ST, England
Website: www.ivpbooks.com
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First published 2017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78359-539-6 paperback 978-1-78359-540-2 ebook

Set in Monotype Garamond 11/13pt

Typeset in Great Britain by CRB Associates, Potterhanworth, Lincolnshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

eBook by [CRB Associates](http://www.crbassociates.com), Potterhanworth, Lincolnshire

Inter-Varsity Press publishes Christian books that are true to the Bible and that communicate the gospel, develop discipleship and strengthen the church for its mission in the world.

IVP originated within the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, now the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, a student movement connecting Christian Unions in universities and colleges throughout Great Britain, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Website: www.uccf.org.uk. That historic association is maintained, and all senior IVP staff and committee members subscribe to the UCCF Basis of Faith.

11. HUMAN SEXUALITY AND CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

A. T. B. McGowan

Introduction

This chapter addresses the question of how our theological anthropology impacts upon our understanding of human sexuality, with particular reference to same-sex relations. The argument presented is that the biblical teaching concerning the fall of humanity into sin, including the effects of that sin on the mind (the noetic effects of sin) has a bearing on any Christian view of same-sex relations and also has a bearing on the nature of the debate and dialogue which takes place on these issues. Other chapters discuss exegetical, ethical and philosophical issues, but, based on the Tyndale Christian Doctrine Lecture for 2016, this chapter approaches the subject from the standpoint of Christian dogmatics.^[1]

In 2015 I was a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Amid the theatre of the opening ceremonies, with the welcome to the Lord High Commissioner (the Queen's representative) and the election of a new Moderator, we engaged in worship. The reading from Scripture was from Romans 12 and included the words, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind'.^[2] When the Assembly later moved into its first business session, it approved an Overture permitting congregations to choose as their minister someone in a same-sex marriage. This had been approved at the previous General Assembly, had been supported by a majority of presbyteries in the ensuing year and now became part of the law of the Church of Scotland, the Overture becoming an Act of the General Assembly.

I was struck by the contrast between the words of Scripture read at the beginning of the Assembly and one of the first actions taken by the Assembly. It seemed to me that the command of the Apostle Paul, 'Do not be conformed to the world', had been ignored and the Assembly had done just that. As I reflected on this, being grieved at the decision my church had taken, I reflected further on the alternative approach outlined by Paul. We are not to be 'conformed to the world', rather we are to be 'transformed by the renewal of our minds'. It had already been my intention to focus in this chapter on issues concerning Christian anthropology, not least the effects of sin on the mind, and this helped to anchor my thoughts.

As part of my preparation for this chapter, I had taken to reading during the evenings at the General Assembly a short book called *Holiness* by Professor John Webster. My increasing appreciation of the book was tragically heightened when, on the Wednesday of the Assembly, I learned that John had died very suddenly. Given that it is not possible in a chapter of this length to explain in full one's theological perspective, I would like to take four themes from the first chapter of that book as a summary of the presuppositions for what follows.

The nature of Christian dogmatics

Christian dogmatics is a work of holy reason which is ‘complementary but strictly subordinate to the exegetical task’^[3] and exists to serve the church. Such theology is not, like much modern theology, either ‘conversationalist or comparative’ in approach.^[4] Rather, it is focused on a specific and limited range of texts, the biblical canon.^[5] In other words, ‘Dogmatics is that delightful activity in which the church praises God by ordering its thinking towards the gospel of Christ’.^[6]

The nature of reason

In opposition to modernity, Christian dogmatics insists that reason is not a natural nor a transcendent faculty or competency, which lies outside the reconciling and redeeming act of God. Like all other sectors of the human condition, it needs to be redeemed. Webster goes on to say: ‘If what Paul calls the renewal of the mind (Romans 12.2) is to be visible anywhere, it has to be in Christian theology, in which holy reason is summoned to address the great matter of God and of all things in God.’^[7]

The nature of revelation

Christian theology is impossible apart from revelation, which is the ‘self-presentation of the holy Trinity’.^[8] Revelation determines both the context and the content of Christian theology. Two quotations from Webster sum this up. First, ‘revelation is the self-giving presence of the holy God which overthrows opposition to God, and, in reconciling, brings us into the light of the knowledge of God’. Second, ‘Christian theology is enclosed by, and does its work within, the sphere of the revelatory presence of the holy God’.^[9] Revelation, then, is not simply the communication of truths but the self-presentation of the holy God.^[10]

The nature of Scripture

This ‘revelatory presence of God is *set forth in Holy Scripture*’.^[11] The text of Scripture has come to us as men spoke ‘from God’, being carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). This means that Scripture carries the authority of God. Scripture’s authority is not conferred by the church or by theology, rather ‘it is the servant of the living voice of God as truth that enables the Church to live from and in the truth’.^[12] The sufficiency of Scripture is also important because there ‘holy reason finds its limit’.^[13] As Webster says, ‘Scripture is sufficient for its end, which is the publication of the saving knowledge of God’.^[14]

With that introduction and writing from that perspective, I want to ask what bearing our theological anthropology has on our theology of same-sex relations. My underlying conviction here is that there is an increasing tendency to do theology *de novo*, paying little attention to the dogmatic tradition and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith as agreed from the third and fourth centuries onwards and as refined and clarified during the Reformation and post-Reformation periods. By contrast, I believe that we must take seriously the dogmatic tradition of the church and depart from it only after careful and considered thought. What then does our dogmatic tradition have to say about the human condition, not least in respect of human sexuality? Or, to put it another way, what bearing does our theological anthropology have on the current debates on same-sex relations? It is my contention that there are three areas in

which our biblical and theological anthropology impacts upon our discussion of same-sex relations, namely, in respect of the body, the mind and the spirit.

The body

Some time ago, I had a dream. I was driving a car down a corridor inside a hotel. I realized that I was about to come to a corner and that there was no way the car would be able to turn through 90 degrees into another corridor. I have no idea what a psychiatrist would make of that dream but happily I woke up. I had been living briefly in a strangely disordered world where cars drove inside buildings instead of outside. When I woke up I was back to normality.

You will remember that in *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, Alice falls down a rabbit hole and finds herself in a strange fantasy world where nothing is quite as it should be. There is a rabbit and a large Cheshire cat who wear clothes and talk, and there is a mouse who gives a lecture on William the Conqueror! There is also a caterpillar who gives advice and frogs who work as footmen in the grand house where the Duchess lives. The story creates a complete parallel world where everything is disordered. The story was actually written under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll by the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a mathematician at Christ Church, Oxford. It is strange to think that a mathematician who lived in such an ordered, structured, logical world could write such a wonderful fantasy tale and paint a picture of a completely disordered world. When I woke up from my dream I left the strange disordered world in which I had briefly been living and came back to the normal world. When you stop reading *Alice in Wonderland*, you leave that peculiar world, with all its distortion of reality, and return to normal.

The question we have to ask, of course, is ‘What is normal?’ Is the world that we experience every day ‘normal’, such that everything else is distorted and disordered? We sometimes take it for granted that what we experience every day is ‘normal’ and when we have dreams or read fantasy books we assume that those disordered worlds in which we find ourselves are ‘not normal’. I want to argue that our world is not normal. It is disordered and distorted and confused. How can it be normal for children to be dying of hunger a few hours by plane from very rich countries? How can it be normal for men and women to cheat and lie and steal and use violence against one another? How can it be normal for relationships to break down so easily and for families to be so easily fractured and destroyed? How can it be normal for governments to stockpile weapons, so that they can destroy other human beings? How can it be normal for international traders and bankers to play roulette with the financial markets and risk the savings and livelihoods of millions of ordinary people? How can our world be considered normal when those who kick a football for a living are paid millions of pounds, while nurses are paid very small salaries? What does normality mean when so-called celebrities act out their pathetic, disordered lives in full view of the media? The fact is that human beings have been deceived into thinking that all of this is normal. In other words, we have been fooled! The truth is that our world is just as distorted, disordered and confused as Alice’s wonderland.

If we want to know why the world is so disordered, we must turn to Genesis 1 – 3. The first three chapters of the book of Genesis are critical for everything which follows in the

Scriptures. In those chapters we are told that God created all things and that all things were 'good'. Our first parents lived in harmony with God, with the creation and with one another. There was no human sin, although the appearance of the serpent, which John later tells us was Satan (Rev. 12:9), indicates that disobedience and sin had entered the universe, even when it had not yet affected human beings. Then in Genesis 3 we have a description of the fall, when our first parents chose to disobey God and instead to follow the advice of the serpent. They disobeyed God's express command by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and, as a result, they fell into sin and were banished from the garden; every human being since then (except Christ) has been affected. It is clear that the impact of this fall was enormous, even cataclysmic. From this point on, human beings were sinners, separated from God by that sin and in need of forgiveness by God and reconciliation to God.

You know the story well, but I want to highlight something about the fall which is relevant for understanding why our world is so disordered and why people are unable to recognize that it is so disordered, namely, the problem of self-centredness. As I have argued elsewhere, I follow Cornelius Van Til and John Murray in believing that, in a certain sense, the fall took place before they took the forbidden fruit.^[15] It took place when our first parents decided that they would listen to Satan, listen to God and then make a decision. In other words, the basis of their sin was to put themselves rather than God at the centre of the universe. Herman Bavinck, speaking of the 'knowledge of good and evil' as described in Genesis 3, put it like this:

The nature of the knowledge of good and evil in view here is characterized by the fact that humans would be like God as a result of it (Gen. 3:5, 22). By violating the command of God and eating of the tree, they would make themselves like God in the sense that they would position themselves outside and above the law and, like God, determine and judge for themselves what good and evil was.^[16]

It is vital that we see the point at issue in this matter. Sin is to be self-centred rather than God-centred. Human beings were created and designed to live in a God-centred way and, apart from that relationship, human beings are not what they should be. Fallen human beings, of course, neither understand nor accept this analysis of their condition. As Calvin wrote: 'For, since blind self-love is innate in all mortals, they are most freely persuaded that nothing inheres in themselves that deserves to be considered hateful.'^[17]

At the beginning of the Reformation, Martin Luther followed Augustine in teaching a doctrine of original sin. Melancthon, the first Protestant theologian of the Reformation, whom Luther called 'the greatest theologian that ever lived', spelled out this doctrine. He emphasized the sin of our first parents and the results of that sin for their posterity. He believed that they possessed the Holy Spirit before the fall and so wrote that they

fell under God's wrath and punishment; and they lost the Holy Spirit and the wonderful virtues which they enjoyed previously, both for themselves and for all mankind, who were to have a beginning in them, and were naturally to come from them. They stood in the place of future mankind. To them the gifts were given; the same would have devolved on their successors if they had remained steadfast in obedience. But when they fell, they lost the gifts for themselves and for all mankind who were naturally to be born of them.^[18]

The key elements of the later catechetical and confessional teaching on sin are already here in summary form.

Calvin spoke of sin as an infection and wrote, ‘Therefore all of us, who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin. In fact, before we saw the light of this life we were soiled and spotted in God’s sight’.^[19] Adam was responsible for this ‘because he infected all his posterity with that corruption into which he had fallen’.^[20] In Reformation and post-Reformation theology, the language of ‘depravity’ began to be used to describe the human condition. Calvin himself spoke of how ‘in the person of the first man we have fallen from our original condition’^[21] and went on to describe the new state of humanity as ‘the universal condition of human depravity’.^[22] This language was used in the subsequent catechisms and confessions of the period. Later Calvinist theologians began to use the language of ‘total depravity’, but this has to be understood carefully. As Berkouwer rightly shows, it is too simplistic to regard the Reformed position as ‘holding a view of *total* corruption which threatened man’s being man’.^[23] In other words, we must resist any suggestion that, since the fall, human beings have ceased to be truly human or have ceased to bear the image of God. Most Reformed theologians have insisted that the ‘remnants’ of the image remain. Calvin does speak of the image of God in human beings as having been ‘obliterated’^[24] but, even while speaking about the depravity of human beings, he recognized that depraved sinners could yet do good things, due to the grace of God.^[25] Kuyper and Bavinck would later develop and expound this doctrine of what came to be called ‘common grace’.^[26]

In the popular media, when someone is described as being ‘totally depraved’, it is normally in reference to a particularly evil person: a serial killer, a child rapist or someone who is judged to have committed crimes against humanity. The theological use of the phrase ‘total depravity’ refers to the fact that the ‘totality’ of the human person has been affected by sin. Those who use this language of ‘total depravity’ do not mean that human beings are as bad as they could be, but rather that the totality of their being has been impacted by sin. In other words, it is not simply the will which has been damaged by sin but also the body, the mind, the emotions, the character, the personality and so on.

All human beings, then, are damaged in every part of their being by the fallenness which resulted from Adam’s sin. Even among those who accept this general principle, of course, the key biblical teaching has been interpreted in a variety of ways, not least in respect of the matter of the transmission of sin. Tertullian and Augustine viewed the transmission of sin in realist terms, believing that all humanity was seminally present in Adam. Thereafter, the contagion of sin passed from generation to generation by propagation. The Scottish Presbyterian tradition from which I come interprets the nature and transmission of sin in terms of imputation, involving a covenant of works made with Adam, a covenant of grace made with Christ and sometimes also a covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son. In my book *Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology*, published recently, I look in more detail at the headship of Adam and the headship of Christ as described in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5 and offer a way of understanding the nature and transmission of sin which maintains the principle of imputation but which does not require an underlying covenantal structure. These differences aside, however, all of the early Reformed theologians were agreed that sin is universal, that it can be traced back to Adam’s sin and fall and that it affects every aspect of

our humanity.

What then can we say about human sexuality, given our fallenness? If the argument concerning the fall, sin and human depravity is sound, then we must argue that our sexuality, along with every other aspect of our humanity, has been damaged by sin. In a fallen world, rather than the perfect world God originally created, we can expect that there will be some people who are born with physical deformity, or mental incapacity, or diseases which limit lifespan. There will also be human beings who are psychopathic, whose natural inclinations lead them to violence and murder. There will be those whose genetic make-up, character and personality mean that they find it very difficult to fit into society, not least those with severe Asperger's syndrome. In the same way, the sexuality of each one of us has been damaged by our inherited fallenness, in different ways and in different measures. For some of us that will mean that they experience same-sex attraction, some will experience gender confusion, others will be sexually attracted to children, yet others will only be sexually satisfied with multiple partners and so on.

It has always been the conviction of the Christian church in all its branches, based upon Holy Scripture, that sexual relationships outside of that between husband and wife are contrary to God's intention. This is not just the view of a few ultra-conservative theologians but has been the historic conviction of the church for two thousand years and remains the moral conviction of the vast majority of the world's Christians today. It is also a view shared with the other Abrahamic faiths.

A common argument used by some who experience same-sex attraction is that 'this is the way God made me', with the implication that their sexuality is God-given and therefore endorsed by God, with the further implication that it should be practised and celebrated. The response to this argument is that each of us is a product of a fallen world and each of us is damaged in some way by sin. We are not all damaged in the same way but certainly we are all damaged. Therefore, far from regarding same-sex attraction as a God-given gift, the Christian church has always regarded it as one form of the multiple human aberrations caused by the fall.

In Scripture we are taught that sexual relations are to be between one man and one woman. Any other expression of sexuality is described as sinful and even perverted.^[27] We should not underestimate the pain and suffering of those whose sexual attractions do not fit into this biblical norm of one man and one woman. The pain is perhaps even more pronounced for Christians who experience same-sex attraction and yet, at the same time, accept the teaching of Scripture. I have a friend, a biblical scholar, who experiences same-sex attraction but who, because he holds to the orthodox interpretation of the teaching of Scripture, has maintained a celibate life. This is a difficult and painful choice, especially when his choice of a celibate life has not been accompanied by the 'gift' of celibacy. This is a matter which, in the church, needs to be approached with a deep pastoral sensitivity.

The mind

Following the dogmatic tradition, the argument of this chapter is that sin affects every aspect of our humanity. For example, in describing the fall, the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it

like this: 'By this sin they fell from their original righteousness, and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.'²⁸

This most certainly includes the mind. In describing the condition of the Colossian Christians before they were reconciled to God by Christ through the cross, Paul says in Colossians 1:21, 'Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour'. This is most significant. They were not simply enemies of God in their actions but in their minds. Paul expresses this noetic effect of sin very powerfully in Romans 8:5–7:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

The unbeliever, then, has a 'mindset' which is opposed to God and unbelievers are enemies of God in their *minds*. How has this situation arisen? In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul says that it has come about because of the fall and the work of the devil: 'The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.'

These passages of Scripture convey powerfully that the damage done by sin has affected the human mind. Our minds, when we are unbelievers, have been blinded by an enemy so that they are simply unable to comprehend the truth about Christ. We might say that the minds of unbelievers have been programmed, by the noetic effects of the fall and by the deliberate action of the devil, such that they are unable to understand spiritual truths or see things properly from a God-centred perspective. Only when minds are opened by God can people understand and believe. We see that in the case of the disciples to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection. As we read in Luke 24:45: 'Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.'

On 11 May 1997, the reigning world chess champion, Garry Kasparov, was beaten by a computer called 'Deep Blue', designed by software engineers at IBM. Kasparov went on to win the six-game match, but the fact that a machine had beaten the world champion in one of those games made news and made history. Deep Blue did not 'think', it merely calculated the best move in each situation by considering the numerous scenarios arising out of each possible move, to a depth of around two hundred million alternatives! Its moves were determined by the programme written by the computer designers. A good deal of chess computer programming consists of 'book moves', such as standard opening sequences. It has sometimes been said that the way to beat a chess computer is to make a move which is not a standard 'book move', in the hope that the computer will not know how best to respond. It is certainly true that simply learning screeds of openings will not ultimately be beneficial unless one knows *why* these are the best moves in any particular opening.

We are not computers (and I do not want to compare the software engineers at IBM with the devil!), but the fact is that the thinking of human beings has also to some extent been 'programmed'. That is to say, it has been predetermined by a number of factors. First, by our genetics, our upbringing and the social environment in which we grew up; second (at least for

those of us in the northern hemisphere), by Western civilization as formed by the Enlightenment; and third, by more recent factors such as scientism, relativism, pluralism and the equality and diversity agendas. Supremely, however, our thinking has been pre-determined and 'programmed' by the fall, by sin and by the work of the devil.

In order to spell out the noetic effects of sin and see the connection with human sexuality, we must turn to Romans 1:18–25. As I have argued elsewhere, Paul here says some quite striking things:

He says that every human being possesses true knowledge of God and that this knowledge is of such clarity that human beings have absolutely no excuse if they deny that they know God. Indeed, he goes so far as to argue that human beings deliberately suppress this knowledge and this truth, because of the innate sinfulness of all fallen creatures. The result of this, he says, is that human beings have exchanged truth for lies and their thinking has become futile. To put it bluntly, they are fools.²⁹

We as human beings are people whose minds and hearts are distorted by sin. Those we speak to about Christ know the truth about God but deliberately suppress it. They are not objective, clear-minded people who simply need to hear the best argument. Paul knew that when he went to Corinth. He did not go with 'wise and persuasive words' (1 Cor. 2:4) because he knew that this would leave them at the mercy of a more articulate, more persuasive speaker with a better argument. Rather, he depended upon the Holy Spirit to use his faltering, nervous words to change lives.

How then does this aspect of our theological anthropology impact on the issues of same-sex relations? There are perhaps two ways. First, unbelievers cannot accept the biblical arguments about human sexuality because their minds are blinded, such that they cannot see and understand spiritual truths. They often reject a Christian analysis out of hand because our views are based on the revelation of a God in whom they do not believe. The Christian response to such people has often demonstrated a lack of coherence in our Christian dogmatics. In our anthropology, we might say that human beings by nature are spiritually dead and spiritually blind but then, in our evangelism and apologetics, treat those same human beings as if they were sensible, rational, objective human beings, with no axe to grind, who are able to weigh up the teaching of Scripture, including the teaching on sexuality, and come to right conclusions. We must recognize the true condition of unbelievers and their need for a transforming work of the Holy Spirit, before they will understand and accept biblical teaching.

Second, there is a danger that we give too much credence to the intellectual arguments of those who oppose a biblical view of homosexual acts. A desire to be regarded as intellectuals and as part of the academy has sometimes led evangelical theologians to compromise on our theological anthropology and to underplay the biblical teaching that unbelievers simply are not equipped to understand spiritual truths. In other words, we sometimes make the mistake of assuming that we are debating on a level playing field with atheists and agnostics, providing rational arguments to persuade rational people to accept truth. In fact, we are working with entirely different epistemologies. Van Til argued that the fundamental error of evidentialism was to submit the biblical teaching about God to the assessment of unbelievers, as if they had the right and the capacity to determine truth. He writes, 'In the last analysis we shall have to

choose between two theories of knowledge. According to one theory, God is the final court of appeal; according to the other theory man is the final court of appeal'.^[30] We might say that the dialogue between the believer and the unbeliever does not consist in a disagreement over the facts but rather in a radical difference in epistemology. As Van Til goes on to say, 'Sin will reveal itself in the field of knowledge in the fact that man makes himself the ultimate court of appeal in the matter of all interpretation. He will refuse to recognize God's authority'.^[31] Only through regeneration will the mind of the unbeliever come to the place where the reality of God is recognized to be that which 'ultimately controls a truly Christian methodology'.^[32]

The spirit

Fallen human beings are not only damaged in body and mind by the effects of the fall and of sin, there is also spiritual damage. In Ephesians 2:1–5, Paul describes the spiritual condition of unbelievers and then contrasts this with the condition of those who are in Christ:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

Unbelievers are spiritually dead until God makes us alive with Christ. In other words, spiritual death is the 'natural' condition of human beings, due to the fall. In its chapter on 'Original Sin', the Scots Confession of 1560 puts it like this: 'Everlasting death has had, and shall have, power and dominion over all who have not been, or are not, or shall not be reborn from above.'^[33] The Second Helvetic Confession, which was adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1566, spells out what is meant by death in this context: 'By death we understand not only bodily death, which all of us must once suffer on account of sins, but also eternal punishment due to our sins and corruptions.'^[34] One of the texts Bullinger used to support this statement was Romans 5:12: 'Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.'

Spiritual life is not a natural but rather a supernatural condition, the gift of God which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. There is a great deal of talk about various forms of 'spirituality' today, but the New Testament knows of only two spiritual conditions: those who are spiritually dead and those who are spiritually alive. This spiritual life comes to us when God, by his Holy Spirit, moves to regenerate us, unite us with Christ and renew our natures.

This stark contrast between believer and unbeliever, between those who are spiritually dead and those who are spiritually alive, is taken further by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2. There he argues that all spiritual understanding comes from the Holy Spirit and that it is impossible to have any real knowledge of God or of spiritual things except through the work of the Holy Spirit. We see this particularly in verses 12–14:

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Notice, it is not simply that the unbeliever *does not* understand the things of the spirit, rather he *cannot* understand them. The believer, however, is able to understand because of the work of the Holy Spirit producing in the believer ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Cor. 2:16).

This transformation from spiritual death to spiritual life, from spiritual darkness to spiritual light, is described in various ways in Scripture. In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that new birth is necessary in order to see the kingdom of God. In John 5:24 he says: ‘I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.’ Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:17, wrote that if anyone was ‘in Christ’ that person was a ‘new creation’.

The key to the movement from spiritual death to spiritual life is the work of the Holy Spirit. We see this in John 7:37–39:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

One of the results of the fall is that the natural condition of human beings is spiritual death. This situation is transformed when, by the work of the Holy Spirit, people are brought from death to life and are united spiritually with Christ.

Given the spiritual effects of the fall, how does this impact on issues of human sexuality? To answer this question, we must turn to 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Here is a letter to Christians. Paul describes what they were like before they came to Christ and then speaks of the transforming power which they experienced in their lives. They had been spiritually dead and were now spiritually alive. This transformation affected them in various ways. One of these concerns human sexuality. Some of them were sexually immoral, some were adulterers, some of them were male prostitutes and some of them were engaged in same-sex sexual activity. The emphasis here is on the words, ‘That is what some of you were’. They were no longer living in that immoral way. They had been changed. What brought about that change? It was the work of the Holy Spirit who effected regeneration (‘you were washed’), justification and sanctification.

Does that mean that the homosexual offenders no longer felt same-sex attraction? I would doubt it. It did mean that, in obedience to the teaching of Scripture, they brought their lives into accord with the biblical teaching on human sexuality. We cannot assume that those who are made alive spiritually in Christ will not suffer temptation, same-sex attraction and so on. What we can expect is that, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, behaviour will change, however difficult and painful that might sometimes be.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we return to the passage from Romans 12, read at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. When we become Christians, our minds, as well as our wills, are renewed and reoriented. We are then called to rethink everything. This is the meaning of Romans 12:1–2: ‘Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ We must think in a new way, see the world in a new way, rethink everything out of a centre in God. Thereafter the task is to bring our minds, our flesh, our emotions and every other aspect of our humanity into obedience and submission before God, on a daily basis.

We live in a disordered world because fallen men and women live self-centred rather than God-centred lives. We fail to see our true condition and do not understand how disordered the world is, because our minds have been blinded by Satan. When we put our faith in Christ, we begin to see things clearly. We then recognize that our world is not normal but distorted and disordered. We then see that the only solution to the problems of our world is for men and women to turn to Christ, that they might be renewed in body, mind and spirit. Then they can join with other believers to rethink everything out of a centre in God, with a view to the reformation, renewal and reconstruction of every aspect of life, taking every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

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