

“ENGAGING WITH THE SPECIAL COMMISSION”

Daniel 1:1-8

I begin with that reading because; I suppose like many of you, I am most comfortable when what we say is rooted in scripture. At the last meeting of the Steering Group of Forward Together I read this passage by way of devotion and I did so because it seemed to me that in some ways it spoke to our present situation and our present crisis.

Most of you will know that it seems that Daniel and friends find themselves to be in Babylon under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. In this chapter, these young men find themselves subjected to a campaign designed to assimilate into the culture and life of Babylon. You are probably familiar the four aspects of the programme that they find themselves subject to. They are isolated from their homeland and thereby their spiritual roots. They were taught the language and literature of the Babylonians. Their names were changed from their Hebrew names that had some part of God’s name in it, and changed to names often incorporating Babylonian gods. Finally, they were to be fed the finest foods from the king’s table.

So the question was how were these young men to respond to the propaganda of Babylonian culture now being imposed upon them? Instinctively they sense they must resist, but in what area. In every area? That was impossible, they could not go home. Upon which issue should they make their stand? They decide to make their stand on the issue of food. They are, of course, not dieting trying to get into size 0 tunics. There is a hint that it might be to do with the fact that the food had been devoted to a Babylonian god, but perhaps not after all the would the vegetables not be included in such pagan acts of worship. Perhaps they were just resisting the assimilation process. Whatever their reason, they made their stand.

Is that not so like our position? The culture is infiltrating the church in questions of morality, and we know we have to make a stand. In what practical ways can we as evangelicals make our stand? We are trying to discern what are the equivalent of the water and vegetables for us in our situation? It is as we seek the Lord's will on these issues it is good for us to meet and pray together as we do today.

I reckon there is quite a wide spectrum of responses to the present situation ranging from people who have already left the church over the issue to people who don't want hear talk of leaving the Church. Then you move in a little from that to those who are ready to leave pretty soon to those who still have a basic loyalty to the denomination. Even the assessment of the significance the existence of the Special Commission varies from those who see it as some kind of victory to those who see it as something that gives time to plan an exit strategy. The situation is further complicated by the fact that there can be differing viewpoints on the issues concerned between Ministers and their congregations. This arises where an evangelical is still in the process of trying to establish an evangelical ministry where there has not been one before.

Having said that, there does seem to be an encouraging unanimity in understanding that this is a crisis because we are not, no matter what the publicists might say, we are not homophobic. The unanimity arises because of our love for the word of God. It is because we are convinced that on this presenting issue that God's word speaks with a clear voice. So let us be encouraged by that fact.

What does engaging with the Commission mean?

In some respects, it is like an inter-faith dialogue from an evangelical perspective.

What will we get from the commission? At a guess, I suspect it will be a bit like a trip to Thornton's – there will be plenty of fudge on offer. There be an attempt to muddy the waters and to blur the lines that distinguish and define.

There will be something in January 2010 onwards. Possibly a DVD?

What questions will we be asked? A bad day in the examination hall – asked the questions we do not want to be asked. Need to be prepared to propose a clear deliverance stating the biblical position and to call for a vote.

Need to establish networks at Presbytery level to meet for prayer. Advert for FT membership. Plan your discussions as best you can. Who will speak first and last? Who is best person on their feet to sweep issues in the midst of the debate. Try to avoid speaking too long as people get impatient. Make all the points but share the points out among as many of you as possible.

Biblical Teaching relating to Homosexual Practice

1) Emphasize the bible's consistent teaching that marriage is a gift from God and is for the blessing of society in general. Refer to the creation in verses such as Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. Highlight the way that this teaching is quoted as authoritative by both Jesus and Paul (Matthew 21:4-5, Ephesians 5:31). We should also emphasize that the unanimous witness of the bible indicates that the gift of sexual intercourse is to be enjoyed exclusively within the marriage bond. There are no exceptions to this teaching in the pages of the bible.

2) We ought to refer to the passages of scripture that speak explicitly on the subject of homosexuality to indicate that there are more than one or two.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 – it is important that we do not allow this teaching to be set aside in the manner that it often is, but instead we should seek to persuade others that it is to be seen as a part of the much wider biblical teaching concerned with the upholding of God's gift of marriage.

1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; 1 Timothy 1:9, 10; Romans 1:21ff – we ought to expect that some will argue that these texts are not relevant because they refer only to

promiscuous homosexual offenders or even to homosexual paedophilia. There is really no exegetical evidence to justify such a limitation in the application of these texts. It would probably be good to focus on 1 Corinthians 6, because of its reference to the change in lifestyle of the Corinthians. It emphasizes that we are not homophobic, but rather that we are concerned for the spiritual welfare the practicing homosexual.

Genesis 18, 19 and Judges 19 – these are the accounts of Sodom and Gomorrah and also of Gibeah. It may be that some might argue in the manner of Sherwin Bailey that the Hebrew verb “to know” does not necessarily have a sexual connotation. The interpretation that follows from that is that Lot’s visitors had flouted the ancient rules of hospitality. However, it does seem that the offer by Lot of women instead is surely suggestive that “to know” is being used in a sexual sense in this context. Furthermore, the adjectives “wicked”, “vile” and “disgraceful” that are used in the passages concerned imply something more serious than a lack of hospitality.

Arguments we are likely to Encounter

1) “Contemporary same-sex partnerships are quite unlike homosexual relationships referred to in the bible. We are talking about loving and committed relationships.”

There are assumptions that need to be questioned here. It is being assumed that because love and commitment are involved that this automatically renders a relationship acceptable for the Christian. Is that really true? If, for example, a married man has an affair with a woman other than his wife, it does not matter how much he might protest that his relationship with this other woman is one that is both loving and committed, it would still be adultery according to the scriptures. Why is this the case? It is because it is only within the one flesh bond between one man and one woman that sexual intercourse may be legitimately exercised.

2) “The church today needs to be inclusive and not exclusive. We want to affirm all people regardless of their race, colour, sex or sexual orientation. After all, we are a broad church.”

It is interesting to note that this argument is expressed using categories and language that have more to do with the canons of biblical correctness than the teaching of Holy Scripture. In our ordination vows, we did not agree to serve a broad church, but a church that holds the Scriptures to be the supreme rule of faith. It is good to remember that Jesus uses the description “broad” in a negative fashion (Matthew 7:13-14).

The argument assumes that we have affirmation without change. It assumes that when God accepts people as they are, that He expects them to remain as they are. This is not the case. We need to emphasize that we believe in the transforming power of the gospel to influence the whole of our lives, and that necessarily includes our morality. We want to be both inclusive and affirming in a biblical sense, but not if this implies turning a blind eye to the need for transformation and change.

3) “We live in a different time and culture from the biblical culture. We don’t stone adulterers anymore.”

Indeed we do but that does not mean that we allow the culture in which we live to shape and determine our Christian principles. Certainly we need to relate to our culture. And we need to do this in the most relevant way possible. But surely there are areas where, as a Christian community, we need to challenge the outlook of the culture, and we need to be offering that challenge in an area where there is such clear and unequivocal biblical teaching. Paul and the Apostles challenged the culture of their day on this issue in spite of the fact that some of the philosophers of their day were commending homosexuality.

Regarding the issue of not stoning adulterers, there are two points to bear in mind when considering this argument. The first is the fact that Israel was a theocratic nation and there is a vastly different context from ours as to what constitutes crime and punishment. But, more importantly, we always interpret the Old Testament teaching in light of the New Testament teaching. We don't stone adulterers because Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery. However, he did still refer to her adultery as sin and called upon her to sin no more.

4) "Evangelicals are resisting the inclusion of those in same-sex partnerships in a similar fashion to the way the resisted the abolition of slavery and the ordination of women."

The accusation on the abolition of slavery is hard to bear since evangelicals were at the heart of the campaign for the abolition of slavery in this country. With respect to the ordination of women, the discussion was about matters of church order whereas the present issue is a Gospel or a Kingdom issue. It is also thought, in some quarters, that there is a tension within the Scriptures themselves about the role of women in the Church, whereas there is no such tension about the practice of homosexuality in the Scriptures.

5) "I have been born this way and I have a right to live my life according to my orientation."

The bible does not offer us the right to conduct ourselves according to our orientations. What if we have a quick temper? Are we allowed to justify outbursts of anger on the basis that it is just the way we are made? Surely not!

6) "What about the grace and mercy of God? Should we not be forgiving towards the practicing homosexual?"

Of course we should, and we do. There are Christians who have homosexual orientation and yet live a celibate lifestyle. We seek to affirm and to prayerfully support such believers. The problem in the present debate is that we are being asked to accept people into leadership who are not seeking forgiveness and who are resolute in continuing to follow a life style that is contrary to the clear will of God.

Notes on the 2007 General Assembly Report

It would be good to take time to read this report. Two points should be highlighted. There is a note to paragraph 4.3.4 which is to be found at the bottom of the page and it refers to the 1984 General Assembly statement that “the practice of homosexual acts is contrary to God’s will for humankind.” The note indicates that this position has not been replaced.

In Paragraph 4.13.18 we find the following; “Although the Group reflects different views on what the church’s attitude to homosexuality should be, there was somewhat surprise at the degree of concord reached regarding the plain meaning of Scripture in the specific mentions of same-sex sexual activity. There was almost a weariness with interested readings of certain key texts, which tortuously attempt to repudiate the writer’s clear intention to condemn behaviour as bad. The bible, when it occasionally takes up the subject of same-sex activity, presents it as a wrong choice.

The Place of the Scriptures

We need to be ready to argue for the primacy of the scriptures and the fact that they are the supreme rule of faith and life. We need to be ready to repudiate the propaganda that we are homophobic and only concerned about this one sin. We need to highlight that we are concerned to uphold the teaching of the bible at all times and in all matters upon which the word of God speaks. We have said that this issue is not just about a few texts, but even if it were, any and all texts of Scripture are to be handled as God’s breathed out word.

The Need for Holy Courage and Holy Boldness

I have heard people in the past say that this is a time to be heard and to put our head above the parapet and they do not do it when the hour arrives. The manner in which we speak, and the way in which we put our case is so important. We do not want to come across as strident or shrill, rather we want to be winsome and persuasive. But we do need to be heard. If ever there was a time to preach a word that may be out of season that time is now. If ever there were was a time to guard the gospel that time is now. If ever there was a time to keep the faith that time is now.

Finally, let us take heart and entrust ourselves to the Lord in all of this. It is tempting to engage in this process with a spirit of resignation, thinking that the outcome is inevitable. With the Lord that is never the case. Those of you who are preachers do this all the time. Many of you have preached the Gospel faithfully for years and seeing precious little fruit. And yet you still go on, praying and longing and hoping that this next time you preach his word, the Lord will open their eyes and they will see the truth. It is really not that different in this case. Our call is to be faithful, changing hearts and minds is the work of the Lord.