



## **Reflections on the Consultation Paper of the Special Commission**

The steering group of Forward Together offer the following reflections on the Special Commission consultation paper. The following paper highlights some issues which we believe need to be raised as you lead or participate in Kirk Session and Presbytery discussions. We encourage you to give direct and careful answers to the questions posed by the Special commission. We anticipate it will be these answers which carry most influence with the Commission as they consider Presbytery/Kirk Session consultations.

The Special Commission on same-sex relationships and the Ministry have produced a consultation paper for discussion in both Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions. The Special Commission has taken the unusual step of instructing those bodies who are considering the report that the responses to their paper be recorded by secret ballot. Questions have been raised as to whether this method used to elicit responses from Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions is really fulfilling their remit. Forward Together has made some enquiries in this regard, but we believe there to be little to be gained by pursuing the issue further at this time. However, one practical point arises from the communications received from the Special Commission. There has been the suggestion that the discussions might be carried out in small groups. It might be helpful when such a practice is being adopted, to propose a motion that there would also be a large group or plenary session so that the Special Commission's remit might be seen to be fulfilled.

### **The Presentation of the Arguments**

The paper outlines a Traditionalist and a Revisionist position. The presentation of the Traditionalist position is reasonably fair, but perhaps is somewhat cold and dispassionate in its tone with no mention of their belief in the grace and forgiveness of the Lord. Whereas, when the Revisionist argument is presented it begins by speaking of God's grace being the core Christian belief. There seems to be an anomaly here, since the revisionist position is that same-sex relationships are not sinful, which would in turn imply that there is no need for God to be gracious and there would then be no need for forgiveness.

Another noteworthy point about the presentation of the Revisionist is that there seems to be rather more biblical references in the footnotes of this section. Yet when the Revisionist argument makes the statement that, "God extends his inclusive grace to men and women, slaves, peoples of all races, heterosexuals and homosexuals", there is no biblical reference in

this case. Clearly the statement alludes to what Paul writes in Galatians 3:28, but is presumably not explicitly referred to because there is no reference to “heterosexuals and homosexuals” in that verse. Clearly, from his other writings, Paul did not believe that these categories were analogous to the categories which he did include in Galatians 3:28. This statement in the Revisionist argument does not seem to have any justification in the teaching of Jesus or of Paul or in any part of the bible.

There is probably a good deal more that could be said about this section of the document, but let us now consider the questions that are to be answered.

### **The Questions to be Answered**

In answer to question 1(a), this might be an opportunity to clearly state that God’s purpose for humanity is that sex was created to be enjoyed between a man and a woman and exclusively within the one man/ one woman marriage bond. If this is indeed a statement of our position, it is different from the Church’s position on divorce that is referred to in 1(b). It is surely the case that the Church’s position on divorce is conditioned by the fact that there is a tension between biblical texts that speak strongly against divorce (Malachi 2:16) on the one hand, and biblical texts refer to exceptional cases like someone who has suffered on account of marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:9) on the other hand. However, in the case of same-sex relationships there are no biblical exceptions, it is the unanimous witness of the bible that same-sex relationships are contrary to the will of God.

As we reflect upon the second question, it seems reasonable to assume that the discussion here is amongst people who have a clear opposition to same-sex relationships and thus part (a) of the question takes care of itself. Therefore, the debate in part (b) is whether position (I) or position (II) is a fairer reflection of our position. Hopefully, it should not be too crucial a distinction since both are opposed to practicing homosexuals in leadership in the church. Both of the positions use terms that need better definition and are potentially loaded. In the case of position (I), the question that one would like to ask is what is meant by the term “disorder”. Whereas in position (II), the question that is begging to be asked is what is meant by saying that “we accept homosexual orientation as a given.” There are problems with both positions. Position (II) might be slightly better in that its focus is more on behaviour and practice, and the tone is better from an evangelistic point of view. However, if we have the opportunity, we might want to include the caveat that we are not at all sure that we agree that homosexuality is a given.

The third question raises the issue of whether those who hold positions of Christian leadership should have a higher standard of Christian living. It might be argued that the teaching of the pastoral letters and the section on eldership at the end of 1 Peter make precisely this point. However, it could also be argued that whether Christian leaders are

expected to have a higher standard of Christian living is a kind of red herring. Since same-sex relationships are contrary to the will of God, and then no-one should be a member of the Church without a change in lifestyle in this and in many other areas. With respect to people in a Civil Partnership, it would be perceived as a massive contradiction for the Church to have rejected the blessing of Civil Partnerships so overwhelmingly in 2006, to then turn round and accept people who are in such a Civil Partnership within its leadership in such a short space of time.

The fourth question turns to the thorny question of the unity of our denomination. Regarding question 4(a), there is a potential danger in the first position that is being offered here. The term “heretical” is usually applied to matters of doctrine rather than matters of practice or morality, and therefore we might want to steer clear of the first option. We might also feel that in option (I) we are being steered into a notion that certain biblical teaching is more important than other parts, which might be another danger we want to avoid. There might therefore be a little more balance in position (II) in the case of 4(a).

Surely question 4(b) is the most difficult to answer and the most controversial of the questions. It is also the question that, if we are going to have any caveats to our answers, this would be the cardinal one to append our qualifications. On the one hand, there might be some who might say that they would not want to make any declaration of an intention to leave the denomination. However, the danger in this might be that the Commission might interpret this as indicating that the question is not that important, and that the traditionalists will not leave, so let us recommend permissive legislation. On the other hand, the statement that we might regard it as obligatory to leave is nowhere near nuanced enough to take account of the complexity of the situation. Perhaps we should investigate a way of saying that we might have to consider leaving if the conditions in 4(b) (I) and (II) pertain.

With respect to 4(c), time must be allotted to see how such a permissive approach would work. It seems to be riddled with problems and difficulties. It could possibly create no-go areas for Ministers of differing views on these issues. What kind of unity would this be? Furthermore, surely if the church delays in giving a clear decision there will be an enormous outcry at the grass roots level.

It would seem that the last question is simply there to attempt to cover all the bases, but it is difficult to conceive that anything might be included here would be perceived as a personal statement, and therefore would be unlikely to be given much weight in the larger debate. We would encourage all Presbyters and Elders to be prayerful in their consideration and discussion of these weighty issues.