



Reflections on Special Commission DVD

As part of the material for consultations with Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions the Special Commission has issued a DVD. This is intended as a starting point for these discussions. Given the technical nature of parts of the paper issued by the commission, it is likely that the DVD will be influential on how many elders and Presbyters react. The steering group of Forward Together offer the following observations on the DVD in the hope that that they will help you prepare for Presbytery and Kirk Session discussions.

Overview

The DVD is presented by Sally Magnusson. She and Lord Hodge present the background to the work of the Special Commission. It is made clear that this takes place against the background of the sexuality report which came to the 2007 General Assembly. This is then followed up by proponents of the two sides in the debate separately setting out their case. David Randall does so for the “traditionalist viewpoint” while Ewan Gilchrist does so for the “revisionist viewpoint”. The DVD concludes with interviews with two members of the Commission who state how the commission would like to see Kirk Session and Presbytery discussions be conducted.

A critique of the revisionist position as presented on the DVD

The church already picks and chooses about the authority of scripture e.g. in allowing the ordination of women.

This is a red herring – perhaps deliberately chosen as an issue where there is disagreement among evangelicals. There is a tension within scripture on issues such as divorce and women in leadership in the church. There is no such tension when it comes to homosexual practice. It is unequivocally condemned in both the Old and New Testaments. If the argument is made that we are selective about our obedience of Scripture, this is true because we are all sinners. That does not lead to the automatic assumption that such selectivity can be endorsed by the church.

Jesus Christ said nothing about homosexuality

There are many issues about which Jesus did not comment. However in his teaching Jesus did not marginalise Old Testament sexual ethics – if anything he reinforced them.

The church has used the Bible to support apartheid and slavery

It was those who took the authority of Scripture seriously who set out to abolish slavery – often in the face of opposition by the establishment,

including parts of the church establishment with a more liberal view of Scripture.

The Bible was given in a very different cultural context

Indeed it was. This is why faithful preaching involves careful exegesis. Its authority however is for all time. It should also be noted that the Greco-Roman culture which formed the background to much of the New Testament was tolerant of homosexual behaviour while all New Testament comment about such behaviour is negative. Thus even in its original culture and context the New Testament was counter-cultural on this issue.

This debate is putting people off the church

There will be people who are put off the church by this. However the Gospel puts everyone on an equal footing – as sinners in need of grace and forgiveness who are called to repent, to follow Jesus and live holy lives. Homosexual sinners are no better or worse than heterosexual sinners – we are all sinners. The Gospel is truly inclusive.

If the church does not ordain homosexuals then gay ministers will be forced out of their manses.

Any recommendations by the Special Commission are unlikely to be retrospective.

Summary

It is noteworthy that both David Randall and Ewan Gilchrist agree that this debate is about the authority of Scripture. The “revisionist” viewpoint seems clear that it is not possible to take the Bible at face value. Thus both sides seem in agreement that this debate is ultimately about the Bible.

Useful reminders

We are grateful to the Special Commission for the reminders of two important things:

1. The reminder of our need to take time to draw near to the Lord in prayer before embarking on the exercise.
2. The reminder of our need to listen humbly and openly to one another, even when we disagree, that we might do so graciously.

Taking these reminders seriously ought not to imply that there has to be a search for a “third way” or some sort of compromise which leaves everybody/nobody happy. Ultimately we believe this is about faithfulness to the Word of God. Following the conclusion of the Special Commission’s consultations, the Church of Scotland will need to decide whether or not to allow people in a homosexual relationship to be ordained or inducted into ministerial posts.