

MARRIAGE TODAY?

Discussion and dialogues

towards a Christian response

to changing social patterns

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Preface

These studies have been prepared to help you to explore some of the issues Christians share with other people about marriage today. What's the core of a good marriage? How do young people find their moral bearings in a world where many see marriage as a dying institution, and where many other kinds of sexual relationship are widespread and socially acknowledged? How do Christians who come to different conclusions about good and bad relationships listen to one another? Can the church survive the diversity of opinion among its members? Is that diversity a possible sign of maturity and tolerance, or a betrayal of the gospel's values, a copout to the secularised 'laissez-faire' mentality of our contemporary world?

We hope that the studies will allow you to start or to take further the discussion in your locality. They are designed to be used selectively if you have only a small amount of time at your disposal. Any one of them will raise many basic topics for reflection and discussion. Some, like the dialogues, are more colloquial. Others are more reflective. But all of them invite your responses.

Ideally, some at least of those involved in any group using the booklet should have read it all. And it would be a valuable background to the discussion if someone had also read the fuller report in the General Assembly Blue Book 1994 (available.....)

But wherever you start, and however much of the booklet you cover, our basic conviction is that **you** are the primary resource in the church's conversation about these matters: you, with your experience as granny, father, daughter, pastor, elder, friend, wife, living out your faith.

It was the experience of the working party which produced the report that we learned most as we listened to one another, coming at these issues from different experiences and perspectives; and as we listened also to those who often feel they have no place in Christian discussions of marriage and sexuality - those who have decided to live together in partnerships, whether heterosexual or homosexual, as well as those who accept and affirm marriage as the only legitimate God-given context for genital sexual relationships. Christian families and congregations increasingly meet all these situations in their own lives.

We hope that you will find in these pages not abstract ideas and theories so much as voices which represent real people; people who exist in our society and in our church, and who are part of the church's quest to speak with candour and integrity and faithfulness about these matters. We still have a long pilgrimage to make together to understand one another, let alone to speak with one voice. But we hope that the widespread use of this booklet, by young people, men's and women's groups, Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, house groups etc. will help the whole church to clarify its mind on these matters; and to find ways of good witness, good pastoral care, and more generous fellowship around issues of marriage and sexuality.

Elizabeth Templeton

Convener

Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine: Working Party on Marriage Today

What the Panel said

The report of the Panel on Doctrine to the General Assembly of 1994 considered the many strains on marriage in our society at the present time and suggested some possible strategies for church action.

This summary could be used in various ways: a) decide which group of statements (1-11) is most important to you and spend the time discussing that; b) divide into smaller groups, each tackling one section; c) ask each individual to mark each bold-type statement with 'agree' or 'disagree' and lead into group discussion that way; d) go straight to the questions at the end of the section.

(1) A POSITIVE STATEMENT

***Marriage is a gift of God.**

It provides the context for the deepest and most joyful relationship between man and woman.

***Christian faith can greatly enrich a marriage relationship.**

A couple's perception of God as the source of all love can enhance both partners in their life together.

***Millions of married couples regard marriage as 'the best thing that ever happened to them'.**

Their experience of life together over several decades is a powerful and positive testing of the possibilities for mutual happiness within the marriage relationship.

***The Christian idea of marriage focuses on a permanent and exclusive relationship.**

Marriage is intended to be a lifelong partnership.

(2) WHEN MARRIAGES BREAK DOWN

***Sexual relationships are central to marriage and to procreation.**

By this means a new generation comes into being; hurt which is the result of marriage breakdown has a direct effect on the well-being of each rising generation.

***Marriage is more than a matter of personal choice and moral conduct.**

It has an immense social significance. The health or frailty of individual marriages has a cumulative knock-on effect on the stability of the community and the nation.

***The Church shares with the rest of society a vested interest in the nurturing of marriage.**

Both on theological and social grounds Christians regard marriage as a necessary and desirable institution.

(3) NO-ONE SAID MARRIAGE WAS EASY

***Marriage can be demanding and costly in terms of pressures to be endured and overcome.**

Tiredness, financial worry, domestic problems, sexual difficulties, differences in temperament and of values - these are just some of the pressures which sap the energy and vision of partners in a marriage.

***Often relationships in marriage and in families can be dysfunctional.**

This stunts the growth of individuals and of their relationships and it is very important that such realities should be acknowledged and faced.

***Given the difficulties in modern living, the real marvel is that so many relationships do prosper and do not end in divorce.**

We must keep things in perspective. Lots of marriages *do* work. Many couples *do* provide the necessary secure and supportive context for bringing up their children - but this is not cause for complacency.

(4) SOME CAUSES OF STRAIN ON MARRIAGES

***Many changes and developments in modern times carry hidden challenges.**

The loss of the 'extended family' in the modern world has led to the isolation of the nuclear family with its attendant pressures.

The need to balance the demands of two careers with other needs of the couple or the family.

The early onset of puberty and increased sexual precocity, combined with a widespread ideology of sexual gratification.

The perception of some that marriage often assumes structures of a male-dominated society which are no longer acceptable.

The sense that divorce is now more socially acceptable and the erosion of confidence in marriage as an institution.

The wider recognition of long-term partnerships as being socially acceptable alternatives to marriage and the decrease in the sense of marriage as being the normative relationship.

5) DON'T SET OFF CHURCH AGAINST WORLD

***An 'us and them' approach to the strains in contemporary marriages is not helpful.**

The church should resist glib rhetoric which calls for family values which merely hurt or alienate those whose own relationships have not worked out as they had hoped. Our first task is to listen and to understand.

***Our responsibility is to address and challenge the world with to find ways of sustaining marriages and family life.**

The church will only be able to speak helpfully where in its own fellowship it begins to achieve this aim.

***The church must consider the challenge to include in its fellowship partners who are unmarried.**

There is need also to understand and accept those who do not belong to the typical nuclear family.

***The church should co-operate with all agencies which attempt to lessen the pressures on marriage and family life.**

This might include, for example, the provision of pre-school education, paternity leave and the equal treatment of part-time workers.

(6) A GOOD MARRIAGE NEEDS WORKED AT

***We can only commend marriage if it works for us.**

We need to demonstrate that marriage provides a fruitful, nourishing and sustaining environment for those involved.

***The description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 offers a model for the marriage relationship.**

While this is a model for all good relationships, it applies also to the more specific commitment of marriage.

***We need to address those things in the practice of the church which obscure the connection between marriage and such all-pervading love.**

What are the things which have made 'Christian marriage' seen unattractive to some people despite the church's high doctrine of that relationship?

(7) IS THE CHURCH PREOCCUPIED WITH INFIDELITY?

***Some marriages which are technically 'faithful' are a misery.**

Yet the church seems less concerned with such barren relationships than with the extra-marital sexual adventures of some married persons.

***The church's preoccupation with sexual fidelity has contributed to its failure to address the more pervasive and eroding sadness of non-relationships within marriage.**

This is not to condone extra-marital sex but to restore the balance and widen the scope of the church's concern and support for married couples.

***Some people claim that our family structures are patriarchal in a way that makes women subservient to men and this contributes significantly to divorces in our society.**

Most divorces are initiated by women and there is the suggestion of an underlying cause being the drifting apart of 'stay-at-home' spouses and absentee partners.

(8) THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IS VERY VULNERABLE

***The present isolation of the nuclear family increases the fragility of marriage.**

Very often the small core unit of the family is left to weather all the stresses of contemporary life without strong or sufficient support.

***Where both parents have full-time work additional pressures exist.**

The easing of financial pressures is often offset by other pressures to do with the lack of time and opportunity to communicate with one another.

***There are other households where neither partner can find work.**

Anxiety, boredom, hardship and lack of self-esteem can increase tension and demoralise the partners in a marriage in a most destructive way.

(9) HOW CAN THE CHURCH HELP?

***The church can do more by way of preparation for marriage.**

We can bring greater realism to the situation by helping couples to anticipate possible difficulties. These will include consideration of time, money, sexuality, decision-making, support systems and communication.

***We should widen our Christian account of fidelity.**

This needs to be understood not just as sexual exclusiveness but in terms of active, dedicated attentiveness to the well-being of the other partner.

***We should encourage partners to share a wider outgoing life beyond the immediate family.**

This may require support for parents of young families.

(10) SOME AREAS OF CHURCH SUPPORT

***The congregation could assume some degree of shared responsibility, beginning with the marriage service itself.**

A comparable responsibility might be Baptism, whereby the congregation undertakes some degree of care and support for the household.

***Possibilities for the 'twinning' of older couples with newlyweds might be explored.**

This is best done in the context of a developed sense of community in the congregation.

***Elderly members of the congregation may have much to offer the young families by way of support.**

This is especially true where grandparents live far away. Churches are particularly well placed to foster trusting and accepting contacts between old and young.

(11) CONSIDER A MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT PROGRAMME

***Some ministers more than others have skills in this area.**

Steps can be taken to develop such skills.

***There are other resources and talents within congregations besides the minister.**

Individual members and support groups within the congregations may have a lot to offer in promoting enrichment programmes for accentuating the positive elements of Christian marriage.

***Congregations need to be made more aware of the resources that exist regionally and nationally for sustaining marriages or helping in times of difficulty.**

There are many enrichment and counselling services available, both church and secular, and these should be made known as a matter of routine before crises arise.

IN THE GROUPS....

What can be done in congregations

- to be more supportive of couples preparing for marriage?
- to celebrate with the couple in the marriage service?
- to befriend newlyweds?
- to offer support to young families?
- to be supportive in a non-judgemental way in times of crises, tension or breakdown?

What can individual Christians do to support friends

- in their marriages?
- in their family life?
- in times of difficulty?

What more can the churches do publicly

- in support of the institution of marriage?
- to promote Christian teaching about marriage?
- in support of family life?
- in support of marriages in crisis?
- in support of those who are divorced?
- in support of those who seek to re-marry?

‘A holy state, instituted by God’

Here is a resume of the traditional Reformed position on marriage - more fully outlined in the Panel's Report to the General Assembly of 1993 - as well as an account of some of contemporary factors which seem to call this in question. Some questions for group discussion are appended.

God has given marriage as a unique and enduring relationship between a man and a woman. This marriage relationship has provided the context for:

- love and companionship between the partners
- the conception and upbringing of children
- the ordering of households and societies.

An Old Testament view

While polygamy is present in portions of Old Testament history, the dominant witness is to the ideal of monogamous marriage. The uniqueness and intended permanency of the relationship is powerfully expressed in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." This text is given the highest endorsement by Jesus in asserting the intended indissolubility of the marriage bond (Mark 10:7).

The Old Testament thus witnesses to the intention that marriage should have the dual function of being a loving relationship and an essential element in family and society. The love of Jacob for Rachel; the imagery of the Song of Songs; the eulogy of the good wife at the end of Proverbs; the Psalmist's hope that children yet unborn will praise the name of God; the commandments to honour parents and to refrain from adultery: all these are consistent with the explanation of marriage as divinely appointed in the opening chapters of Genesis.

Significantly, the Bible uses marriage as a picture of God's love for Israel and Christ's love for the Church (Hosea chapters 1-3; Ephesians 5:21ff.) In this, human marriage receives its supreme accolade and thus the experience of marriage for Christians offers an insight into the communion of freedom and love that God wills not only between human persons but also between himself and his creatures.

From the Marriage Service

The meaning and purpose of marriage is summed up in the opening statement to the First Order for Marriage in the Church of Scotland's *Common Order*:

Marriage is a gift of God
and a means of grace.
In the life-long union of marriage
we can know the joy of God,
who made us in his own image, male and female.

Marriage is founded in God's loving nature,
and in his covenant of love with us in Christ.
Husband and wife,
in giving themselves to each other in love,
reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In Christian marriage,
wife and husband are called
to live faithfully together,
to love each other with respect,
tenderness, and delight.
The companionship and comfort of marriage
enable the full expression
of physical love between husband and wife.

They share the life of a home,
and may be trusted
with the gift and care of children.
They help to shape a society
in which human dignity and happiness
may flourish and abound.

Sex in Marriage

At times procreation has been seen as the fundamental reason for marriage, but it has also been stressed, especially in Protestantism, that a marriage is primarily justified by the comfort and joy realised by husband and wife in their love for one another. Traditional Reformed teaching regards sex as both for having children and for mutual enjoyment within marriage. Marriage itself, when understood as the proper setting for sexual union, calls for chastity beforehand in those who are to be married, and fidelity within marriage calls for faithfulness to one partner. The Church's most constructive response to the increasing acceptance of pre-marital and extra-marital sex may be to point to the higher ideal of marriage.

Why a Wedding Service?

Although marriage is still frequently entered into through a Christian wedding service, the Church of Scotland has never insisted that this is the only way to begin a marriage - which is in fact constituted by the vows and the mutual intent of the couple to take each other as husband and wife. In the past, both Church and state have recognised persons in long-term cohabitation as husband and wife, and marriages begun with a Registry Office ceremony are regarded as valid and substantial. From the Christian point of view it is not only marriages between Christians which are to be seen as gifts of God but any in which the value and depth of this human bonding are recognised. Marriage, however it is begun and whatever the faith stance of the participants, identifies a couple as a valued unit within society and serves also to make a clear declaration concerning relationships. The Christian wedding service provides special opportunity for recognition and celebration of marriage as a gift of God, for families to acknowledge new bonds and relationships, and in some circumstances for the local or wider Christian community to rejoice with and offer support to the couple.

What If Things Go Wrong?

Marriage is a relationship between two fallible and imperfect human beings. While the intention is to establish a partnership that is permanent and enriching, this may not be achieved due to error, failure or misfortune. People may make a mistake when they choose a partner, or through the course of time a relationship which flourished at the outset of marriage may reach a point of irretrievable breakdown. We should recognise the reality of this without either forgetting that the proper intention of marriage is to establish a permanent partnership or underestimating the hurt and distress (often to children as well as to both partners) that generally accompany marital breakdown. We should acknowledge therefore that, as a marriage partnership breaks down, the decision to divorce may sometimes be the right one. The Church of Scotland wrestled with these issues in the 1950s, since when marital breakdown has become increasingly prevalent. The Report to the 1957 General Assembly on the "Re-marriage of Divorced Persons" remains instructive:

Marriage requires an inner security which is given by life-long trust and fidelity, while a stable home provides the best environment for the proper nurture of children. Yet it is also believed that some homes come to such a degree of instability, and relationships become so poisoned by infidelity, cruelty and neglect, that divorce ought to be granted. Divorce is here thought of more as a remedy for an intolerable position than a judgement upon a matrimonial offence.
General Assembly Reports, 1957, pp.829-830

We should also note that Jesus' teaching on divorce is more radical than the practice of the society in which he lived. While some schools of rabbinical teaching argued that a man could lawfully divorce his wife on a variety of grounds, the resistance to divorce in Mark 10:2ff implies the permanence of the marital bond while also elevating the status of women in Jewish society.

Deepening Relationships

In the teaching of Jesus the quality of relationships is deepened yet qualified in significant ways. The seventh commandment is radically intensified:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery", but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

Sexual purity and respect for the marriage bond are required not just of outward behaviour but in the innermost reaches of the heart and mind. Every idle thought must be made captive to obey Christ (II Corinthians 10:5).

Singleness and Marriage

Nevertheless, even given that Jesus qualifies, extends and deepens the significance of marriage, the value of individuals does not depend upon status, whether marital or any other. Marriage is not the most important life-event for Jesus and the New Testament. It is not idolised or treated as an end in itself. Jesus himself was a single man and so was Paul. Jesus taught that the bonds of the kingdom of God were of more importance than those of the family. His followers, both men and women, had to leave their families for the sake of the cause to which he had called them. Paul teaches that it is permissible to marry - "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (I Corinthians 7:9) - but he thinks that for many Christian people there may be more important things to do with their lives than to marry.

Seeking the Kingdom

Seeking first the Kingdom of God implies an ordering of priorities which embraces and permeates the gift of marriage. For Christians a relationship ordained by God must serve the command to love him with heart and soul and mind and our neighbour as ourselves. Married Christians are not meant to be turned in on themselves and hostile to those outside, but rather to be generous and open in using the gift of their marriage and home to the honour of God and the blessing of others.

Seeking first the Kingdom of God also implies a particular ordering of priorities for the Christian single person. For such there is a better way of serving God's Kingdom than marriage. It is in this context that the vocation to celibacy ought still to be recognised. It should not be seen merely as a means of releasing time and energy for service and witness which might not otherwise be possible. The single person must not be undervalued or marginalised; and if the Church appears to do this, we must point to the celibacy of Christ himself.

Pastoral Problems

Holding to any standard with regard to chastity and fidelity in sexual and marital matters has always involved conflict and "hard cases" which require some kind of pastoral response. From Jesus' early morning encounter in the temple with the woman taken in adultery and her accusers, throughout the history of the Christian Church and to this day, painful human circumstances and real moral dilemmas demand that response. Neither careless undiscerning acceptance of everything and anything, nor uncaring legalism, has ever been a worthy reply to vexing dilemmas in the areas of sexuality and marriage.

In western society the universal availability of contraceptives, changes in the law with regard to abortion, changes in attitudes to single parenthood and changes in personal independence, career choice and the economic status of women, have made problems in the three traditional areas of conflict both more common and more open to debate.

These areas of concern and conflict underlie much of this study guide and at this point we simply identify them:

1. Teenage and Pre-marital Sexuality

Sexual development is part of natural and healthy human growth to maturity; but the ever-present questions of how far "experimentation" can go and what is acceptable in a pre-marital relationship have become more pressing because of the changes mentioned above. The Church seems to speak with many voices to its young members and faithfulness to a Christian sexual morality is not so easily discerned, nor credibility within society so easily held and won, as in previous generations. Here, as in the other areas of concern and conflict, there is a need for careful listening and caring faithfulness.

2. Cohabitation

For an increasing number of couples today cohabitation is not a matter of careless indifference but of sincere conviction. There are those who, believing that marriage is restricting or simply not a relationship they want, choose to cohabit. Some may have had experiences of family life with unhappily married parents which leave them with completely negative views on marriage. Some may simply have no positive view of marriage at all and refuse to regard it as a real option. What is the Church saying to such couples? What will the Church say if such couples change their minds (as many do, for example, when a wanted pregnancy occurs) and come asking for marriage in the Church?

3. Extra-marital Relationships

While the gift of a marriage within which both parties grow closer in fidelity and love is something for which we should work and pray in all cases, the increasing incidence of separation and divorce presents serious pastoral problems. It cannot be enough to include all marriages which have become dead and cold under the verdict of "not tried hard enough". Extra-marital sexual relationships do not become acceptable because circumstances become more difficult; but in a world where nearly every family is touched by the pain of marital breakdown, the pastoral concern of the Church needs to embrace all parties and fidelity needs to be sought always with compassion.

IN THE GROUPS

1. Do you think that Christian marriage is significantly different from the marriage of non-Christians? If so, why and how?
2. What are the qualities and dispositions that make for a good marriage? Are these more liable to occur in Christian marriages than in others?
3. The group may divide into three sections, each discussing one of the "pastoral problems" in relation to their own experience. (The more the group members are assured of respect and confidentiality, the more truthful and helpful such discussion is likely to be.)

A Question of Conscience - and a Family Dilemma

(Lynn is a twenty four year old, living away from home, who has come back for a weekend with her parents.)

Lynn That was a great meal, Mum. Thanks

Mum It's good to have you back again. It's a long time since you were home.

Lynn Well I wanted to come this weekend. I've got some news I wanted to tell you and Dad myself. Jim and I have got to the point where we have decided we want to be together.

Dad That's wonderful. You're getting married!

Lynn No, Dad, we're not getting married - not yet anyway. I'm moving into Jim's flat next week.

Dad What?

Lynn I was afraid it might upset you. That's why I wanted to tell you myself. We've known each other for two years now. We've discussed it a lot and we both feel that what we want to do is to be together and share a life together and look after each other.

Dad I can't believe I'm hearing this. My own daughter!

Mum Wait a minute, Bob. Let's try to discuss this calmly.

Dad There isn't much to discuss. Our daughter's just told us she's going to live in sin with her boyfriend. So much for all the standards we've tried to teach her. She's only come home to tell us what failures we are.

Lynn Dad, you and Mum haven't failed at all. If it hadn't been for all your guidance I wouldn't have been able to make this decision.

Dad I don't see how you can think our guidance has anything at all to do with your moving in with Jim. This has always been a Christian household, and ever since you were in Sunday School we've tried to help you understand that sex is something to be kept for marriage and not played around with.

Lynn But we're not playing around; and I've always been grateful for the guidelines you gave me. Do you remember that boy I thought was so wonderful when I was sixteen? You warned me against getting too involved with him, and how right you were. I've been so thankful for that. If I'd slept with him I'd have felt really cheap because there would have been no love or commitment in it - just curiosity. Nobody we know admires people who behave like that. There's something pathetic about people who sleep around with one partner after another; and I'm sure it's usually because they're unhappy in themselves and have no real sense of their own value - let alone the value of the people they latch on to. My relationship with Jim is not like that at all.

Dad All right, I accept that. But however you try to dignify it, it's still sex outside marriage. The Bible has a word for that: fornication. All the way through the Bible we're warned about that sort of behaviour. From Adam and Eve onwards it's quite clear that sex is meant to be for marriage - in just one relationship, for life.

Lynn Dad, you taught me to love the Bible and I'm grateful to you that you did. But I sometimes wonder if you're kidding yourself about the simple morality you think it teaches. There are parts of it that say I should be stoned for doing what I am doing. I hope you wouldn't go that far! There are Bible heroes that have more than one wife. There are fathers who offer their daughters for sex with strangers as a sign of hospitality. Look at the Bible's attitude to childless wives. Did you ever feel that Mum was being judged by God because you waited ten years for me to come along? And what about those weird rules about surrogacy. Do you honestly believe that if Uncle Andy walked under a bus tomorrow you would have a duty to sleep with Aunt Betty and try to give her a child?

Dad Don't be disgusting. No, of course we didn't feel that Mum was being judged by God, and after that long wait you've always been specially precious to us. I'll admit there may be parts of the Old Testament that have to be seen in the context of their time. It's the product of a very ancient civilization after all. But if we take our bearings from the New Testament, it's not difficult to tell which parts of Old Testament teaching are still valid. Marriage is central all the way through as the proper setting for sexual activity, and Jesus certainly didn't take marriage lightly. He quoted the creation story and reinforced it.

Lynn But I don't think Jesus took any relationships lightly, and we're not taking ours lightly either. Jim and I aren't trying to knock marriage at all. We've talked about it, and if we still feel the same about each other in a few years once our jobs are settled and we can see the way ahead we may well think about it. I think we would both feel that it was likely to provide the most secure basis for a family home

if we had children. But we've seen too many people getting married early because they think it's the only way they can be together, and then breaking up; and we know what a gruesome experience it's been for them. It's partly because we do think so highly of marriage that we feel it would be irresponsible for us at this stage. All we're sure of at the moment is that we love each other and we trust each other and we're good for each other, and we want to be together, and we hope that it will be for always but we can't be sure yet.

Dad There's a great deal of "we, we, we..." in what you're saying. Christians aren't free to do just what "we" think or want. There's far too much talk about "rights" nowadays. People simply ignore rules and guidelines when they find them difficult or inconvenient. But I suppose it's not all your fault. Some Church leaders have a great deal to answer for; they're so afraid of seeming out of touch. There is nothing so pathetic as ministers and Church committees trying to be trendy and swim with the tide. They forget what Jesus taught about taking up the cross. They just drift with the outside world and they're useless as salt and light.

Lynn Dad, I don't think you have any idea how smug you sound when you talk like that. I don't know how Mum feels, hearing marriage described as taking up a cross; but if things have worked out well for you, don't you think you should feel sorry for people whose relationships have not been so good? You make it sound as if being happily married was some sort of virtue to feel proud of. Surely it's a very humbling thing to be as blessed as you and Mum have been. Security and trust and your complete acceptance of each other are what everybody longs for, deep down.

Mum Yes, I don't think you're being quite fair, Bob; and I don't think it's so simple as you make out. We had a speaker at the Guild last week who really made us think. She was telling us how much the Church's view of marriage had changed over the centuries. And she asked us why we always assume that marriage is always good and other relationships are always bad. She is a professional counsellor, and she said that a huge number of her clients are people who've been trapped in miserable marriages for years. She said she had become convinced that the quality of people's relationships mattered far more than their legal status, and that traditional Christian morality had produced a lot of casualties as well as a lot of hypocrisy. I'd always been taught that Victorian times were the great age of the family. I'd never realised just how powerless women were, or what a dreadful amount of prostitution there was underneath the respectable facade. We've had a wonderful marriage and I'd love for Lynn to have that too. But maybe just "being married" isn't so important as we used to think. We didn't have any options in our day.

Dad I don't think any of that is a reason to change the basic view of marriage - as something lifelong, between one man and one woman, with no sex before it or outside it. The Church has always taught that, even if its ceremonies have varied a lot.

Lynn What did your parents tell you, Mum? Why did they say it was so important to save yourself for marriage?

Mum I think it was just taken for granted. I've no idea how many people did save themselves for marriage, but it was always assumed that it was the "Christian" thing to do. I don't remember any special reasons being given for it. There were just a lot of warnings about the dangers of unwanted babies.

Lynn Well we have no intention of producing unwanted babies, and there seem to us to be far more important issues for the Church to worry about than who is sleeping with who. There are real problems and real evils out there for the Church to be tackling: hunger, exploitation, homelessness, green issues. The Church would have much more credibility with most of our friends if they saw it really tackling these big things instead of getting worked up because two people who love each other want to live together.

Mum Bob, is this not something you could ask to have on the agenda for a Session meeting? We know a lot of families in the congregation who have been in exactly the same situation. Wouldn't it be helpful to discuss it?

Dad Not on your life. That would be downright embarrassing. Even if we had a general discussion, people would know it was arising because of our family situation. I have been a member of that Session for twenty two years and I certainly don't want everybody else knowing what a mess we've got into. If Lynn's as determined on this immoral lifestyle as she seems to be, the only hope is that she'll come to her senses before long and decide on a proper wedding. And what would you expect the Minister to do then, if I'd told him that she'd been living with the man already.

Lynn Are you honestly suggesting, Dad, that if Jim and I decided to be married the Church might turn us away?

Dad Well what do you expect Ministers to do? Just smile and pretend they don't notice that couples live at the same address? Surely you wouldn't respect a minister who had no convictions and

just tried to satisfy everybody. Ministers have integrity too; and I'm sure they're particularly sad when Church members think they can do as they please. They know that God's rules are for our good.

Lynn But, Dad, the "rules" as you call them haven't always been the same. If we'd been living in Bible times, you would probably have decided who I was going to marry, and I wouldn't have had any say in it. I would just have been your property. Things are different now, and I am glad they're different! You used to tell me wonderful stories about God leading his people through the desert - always being out in front of them, always having more to teach them than they could absorb or understand. I believe that that's what's happening now.

Mum But Lynn, dear, how can you be sure? Two years isn't all that long, and you've not really had to face any of the tough patches yet. If you get sexually involved before you're quite sure, you could get terribly terribly hurt. It's much easier for men to move on and not be so hurt.

Lynn Mum, there's no proving it's for ever, no matter what happens. We're both as sure as we can be that we want to go through our whole lives together, ups and downs, hard times and good ones. We're not just after quick kicks. But honestly it seems ridiculous to be as close as we are and not to sleep together. We're ready for it. We've both got some way to go before we've worked out career moves and where we'll settle and all that; but we know that being together physically would deepen and enrich the commitment we've made to work that out together. It's just that there doesn't seem to be any special reason to stop learning to know each other physically at the point of making love properly. It's artificial, and I think it would actually lead to so much frustration and quarrelling and constant yearning that it would get all out of proportion. There's no question of Jim pressuring me. We both believe that God is with us at this stage in our lives, not waiting to dangle a blessing over our relationship in the future if we've been a good little boy and girl in the meantime. We don't want to be furtive, or to be pushed into marriage just to legitimise something that seems to us wholesome and right and God-given.

Dad But, my Lynn, it's such a total thing, the most complete sharing a man and woman can do. It belongs to the total trust that marriage vows express.

Lynn Yes, Dad, but we've got the trust already. When the time comes for vows, they'll just be catching up with that. And whether we've slept together or not won't make those vows an inch less true or real or meaningful. Sure, we're taking the risk of total commitment, but you've always told me that God doesn't just hand out security. He invites us to take risks.

Dad He doesn't invite us to risk plain disobedience! I realise that many of your non-Christian friends are living together, but Christians must be ready to stand out and be different - as they were in Paul's time. I've heard no reason at all why we should abandon the Bible's plain message. However you dress this up or try to rationalise it, I still can't see what you are doing as anything other than plain wrong. God doesn't suddenly change his mind just because we find his teaching too demanding.

Mum But maybe he offers us guidelines, Bob, and leaves people in different times and different places to apply them in new situations. Paul told slaves to "obey their masters in fear and trembling" even when they were ill-treated, but surely that doesn't mean later Christians were wrong to want to do away with slavery. If the Bible's such a clear-cut rule book as you say it is, I can't understand why you don't want me to wear a hat to Church every Sunday! You're accusing Lynn of rationalising; but I sometimes wonder if folk our age aren't too harsh on people with different ideas because secretly we resent them having choices that we didn't have. Let's deal with the question of a wedding later, if it arises. Meantime, I think we should be glad that Lynn and Jim have thought through their position so thoroughly, and give them our support.

FOR DISCUSSION:

If there has not been opportunity to read and reflect on the dialogue before the group meeting, three members should read it aloud.

The following questions might then be considered:

Do you feel particularly sympathetic to one character or another?

What seem to be the merits and limitations of each character's stance? Are there other arguments you feel should have been raised by any of them?

What should the minister say when Lynn and Jim approach him two years later to arrange a wedding?

Can you identify the factors in your understanding of God, the Bible, the modern world, which lie beneath your response to the dialogue?

Why the Contemporary Debate?

In 1993 it was agreed without discussion or debate that "the General Assembly affirm the institution of marriage as a gift of God to his human creatures, the normative context of the deepest and most joyful relationship between man and woman, enhanced for Christian partners by their shared faith and their perception of God as source of all love". There is no disagreement about marriage as a gift and blessing, or about its value to society. Nor is there any disagreement over the need for responsibility, restraint and commitment in the expression of sexuality. All Christians must be concerned to protect young people from a culture which seems to treat sexual adventure as a necessary part of growing up, and to protect adults from exploitative or commercial sexual practices which diminish their status as human beings. Commercial sex and so-called casual sex are always an unworthy abuse of God's gift; so is any union which does not arise from free adult commitment on the part of both partners.

There is, however, disagreement in the Church over whether adult sexual relationships other than marriage can ever be appropriate and moral. Is premarital sex ever an acceptable option for Christians? Are same-sex relationships always intrinsically wrong? We produce here two different Christian responses to the difficult questions that are exercising all the major western Churches at the present time. (A) represents what might be called a traditional view: Christian standards, though difficult to achieve, are clear and permanently applicable, and we have no mandate to tamper with them. (B) suggests that Christians may have much to learn from the contemporary world also: and that in practice Christians have always had to interpret the precepts of the Bible in ways relevant to their own time and culture.

The issues are raised under three headings, with both (A) and (B) statements under each of them. For discussion purposes the whole group may wish to study them all; or if numbers are large enough it may be better to divide into three smaller groups to look at the sections separately, then meet to share views with the others.

DISCERNING GOD AT WORK IN THE WORLD (A)

The Church's relationship to an unbelieving world

All agree that changing attitudes and behaviour in society at large are a major factor behind pressures for the Church to depart from its traditional teaching. We must therefore ask: what weight should the Church give to changing convictions and lifestyles in the wider community when formulating its own beliefs and ethics?

The Church in Scotland (and generally in the West) is in severe decline. As a result, popular attitudes and practice increasingly take little or no account of Christian faith. Parts of the media are consistently dismissive of traditional Christianity. Since Christian ethics are based on Christian doctrine, it seems unthinkable that a largely unbelieving world should have a significant influence on the Church's sexual ethics.

It is not as though the progressive abandonment of Christian ethical standards has brought benefits all round. The difficulty in curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS tragically demonstrates the very opposite. The full effects of the increasing erosion of the two-parent family, especially on children, may not be seen for generations. Yet a recent American survey has already concluded that "this is the first generation in the nation's history to do worse psychologically, socially and economically than its parents" (Atlantic Monthly, April 1993).

No Church can be detached from its social and cultural context. In Scotland that context bears the varied imprints of earlier Christian traditions - so that voices are occasionally heard outside the Church daring to recall it to its authentic task.

Nor is that context static. Christians are continually summoned to "make sense" of their faith amidst changes in lifestyle, social conventions, communications, economics, science and technology

and so on. Though none of these is a bearer of Christian revelation, all truth is ultimately God's truth. Hence the critical task of discernment, in the light of Scripture - our "supreme rule of faith and life". Freud may indeed have helped us in part to understand how human beings "tick" (although aspects of his thought remain keenly contested). But easy contraception does not make premarital or extramarital sex now acceptable - for Christians have always regarded them as wrong on deeper grounds than risk of pregnancy.

The uniqueness of revelation

In revelation-history God raised up prophets and apostles, and he spoke with unique directness in his Son. The definitive presentation of that divine self-revelation is now accessible only in Scripture. This is where the Church hears the voice of the living God today, as his Word is sensitively re-presented through the Spirit and lived out in our midst. And since the Church is characterised by heeding the voice of its Shepherd (John 10: 3-5) it dare not adopt the Gallup-poll approach to deciding issues which is so prevalent today: if 90 per cent (or 75 per cent or 55 per cent) of people believe it, then it must be OK. Truth - in ethics, theology or anywhere else, should not be confused with mere consensus.

The early Church did not get its ethics from contemporary society. Becoming a Christian often meant a break with the past: "that is what some of you were. But you were washed..." (from I Corinthians 6: 9-11 - a particularly relevant passage). The early Christians' minority status may be increasingly relevant to the experience of the Church in Scotland. If so, the Church may expect to be variously misunderstood, despised or even discriminated against, but it must nevertheless faithfully hold fast and hold forth the Word of life with confidence and compassion. Far, far better this, however painful it may prove, than submerging our birthright in a mess of contemporary pottage. The abiding relevance of the Church as it approaches its third millennium rests where it has rested in every age - in the stewardship of the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Here above all we discern God at work in our world today.

DISCERNING GOD AT WORK IN THE WORLD (B)

The presence of God in creation and culture

The central and crucial action of God in human history is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is precisely that historical core of our faith which gives us hope that God is present, active and creative elsewhere also. For the whole earth is God's. Christ has bound himself to the whole human race and indeed to the fragile inanimate earth. In the mystery of the Trinity, God has been at work from the beginning of time, in every culture and society.

This basic conviction invites us to detect God's providential presence, in principle, even in times and places which are not Christian. We perceive his huge gifts to us in the freedom of secular creation - for example, the human capacity for searching and insight into the nature of reality, the love of beauty, the wonder of good relationship. This is not to equate God with all history or all cultures. Not everything that happens in the world can be attributed to God. We have to recognise that we live in a fallen world: that we consistently abuse God's gifts, that our understanding of truth is often distorted, that we fail in our responsibilities. The Gospel makes it very clear that we are called to a transformation of our being. This transformation requires that we acknowledge the judgement of the Cross on our sinful existence.

But we live in a post-resurrection world, in which God has secured and redeemed the goodness of creation in his love, freeing us to celebrate all those things which enrich and bless us as we anticipate the final coming of the Kingdom. To accept whatever value-judgements are thrown up within society at any given moment is a distortion; so is a pessimistic theology which distrusts the world and recoils from it on principle. For Christians, it is not just an option but a positive responsibility to look at the world with hope and expectancy and tenderness as the world which is loved by God and where God is at work. We should marvel at the long evolutionary history of things. We should marvel too at the

relatively short period of human history, with its staggering riches of art, science, philosophy, political development, human community - acknowledging also with penitence its shames and disasters.

The complexity of "reading the signs"

Scanning one's own time and culture for signs of God or of deviation from God is particularly difficult. Hindsight often makes it easier to decide what has been providential development and what has been human mismanagement in previous generations. Interpreting the present is nearly always painful, sometimes violently contested. We have only to think of the different views of kingship in the Old Testament, or the fierce debate between Paul and the Jerusalem apostles over circumcision, to see that this kind of problem arises in good conscience within faith communities, not simply between Church and world.

For a faith such as Christianity, which upholds the written texts of Scripture as the supreme rule of faith and life, conformity to Scripture is clearly a basic yardstick by which to judge any situation or act or policy. As the next section shows, however, that evaluation is itself not at all simple, for the way that we read Scripture is bound up with the way in which we understand God. Our reading is coloured by our upbringing, by experience and by tradition. We must recognise from within the story of God's dealings with his people, that there are times when the book itself may become an obstruction to our hearing the voice of the living God. "The Bible says..." is not in itself a conclusive argument. If we say only "It is written...", and not hear "But I say unto you..." we are turning a blind eye to the contradictions within Scripture itself.

Such questions often surface at times when history or science produces new insights - for instance, the Copernican revolution, or the discovery of fossil remains. Sometimes they accompany shifts in a society's sense of justice, or new awareness of ideas that challenge what was formerly taken for granted, such as the anti-slavery movement or the rejection of feudalism. Such challenges may arise from religious faith, but need not do so. The history of Christendom shows the Church often turning away from new truths and developments, especially those arising from secular learning, in the misplaced belief that the new truth cannot be of God since it contradicts accepted belief and practice. The resistance of past generations (e.g. to rail travel, to electricity, to organ music) tends now to sound comical, but in broad terms the argument is usually "Nothing has changed. If God had meant us to have ... he'd have given it to us in the first place". Some developments of the more recent past, such as artificial contraception, still have a ring of controversy in certain quarters. Once we are aware of the tendency to suspect or resist new discoveries and possibilities, it is a proper question whether some of our judgements on today's issues (for instance bio-engineering, euthanasia, the legalising of homosexual relationships) may look just as dated to the faithful of future generations. This does not mean that what is new is by definition good. It does mean we have to look at new developments with an open mind on the question of whether or not God is in them.

In the end, such judgements must be provisional, albeit committed. In practice they will depend on several factors: our basic sense of the character of God and whether we perceive him as generous, forgiving, stern, censorious - on our sense of what the fruits of the Spirit look like in human life - on our understanding of the primary characteristics of the Kingdom to whose fullness we are called. These perceptions are dependent upon Scripture, yet because they are bound up with our Christian nurture and experience they also influence the way that we respond to Scripture.

INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE TODAY (A)

The Bible and its use in the Church

Every generation tends to exaggerate its own significance. Recent years have seen new emphases and approaches in the study of the bible, but their novelty should neither be overstated nor treated as fresh revelation. Accompanying these developments has been a growing chorus about the inadequacy, for the Church's ministry of the Word of God, of the biblical criticism that has held academic sway for so long. Books and projects bearing titles such as *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, *The End of the Historical Critical Method*, and *"Scripture: from Rumour to Recovery"*,

are increasingly in evidence. Also growing in university departments, on the other hand, are secularising currents keen to dispense with notions of "Scripture" and "canon" altogether.

So the latest trends in biblical studies deserve careful evaluation. The deeply historical character of all Scripture continues to be underlined. To understand its witness for today, we must first (but not solely) understand the contexts - linguistic, cultural, political, socio-economic as well as religious - in which the various texts were produced. There is no core to Scripture free from this historical conditioning. "God is love" is true in a biblical sense only when "God" and "love" are given their contextual meanings - not what we might want them to mean today.

This emphasis presents challenges to the interpreter of the Bible, but it must not be exaggerated (as though the gulf between the biblical world and ours were unbridgeable) nor viewed solely as a drawback. Once-for-all events are absolutely central to the Christian faith. It was "under Pontius Pilate", in Jerusalem around 30 A.D., that Jesus of Nazareth wrought the world's eternal salvation. At that time and place (and in their languages and literary forms) God spoke as he has never spoken before or since.

Principles of interpretation

Bible students have always interpreted its different parts in the light of their place in the unfolding of revelation-history, from Old Testament shadow and promise to New Testament substance and fulfilment. They have always distinguished between Old Testament teachings reaffirmed in the New (like the Two Great Commandments - from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Matthew 22: 37-39) and others fulfilled and hence superseded. And they have likewise distinguished what appears incidentally (like slavery) from what is taught as constitutive.

One recent approach focusses on the Bible's readers: our experience, personality, social status and cultural setting all influence how we read Scripture. Latin American liberation theologians have shown how the oppressed and the poor hear Scripture differently from the powerful and wealthy (and from Western intellectuals!) Women notice what men miss, and so on.

Yet the biblical text is one. There is one Word of God for all (see Ephesians 4: 4-6). We must be alert to the limitations or bias of our own interpretation of Scripture and sensitive, sympathetically and critically, to the insights of others. Do married persons, for example, read Scripture selectively to the hurt of single men or women? In this task the Church trusts in the help of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures and now illuminates the text for its readers and hearers. It is on the text that the Spirit's ministry focusses - not on developing some vague "mind of the Church" (which was an approach to determining truth decisively rejected by the Reformation).

As the one Spirit bestows varied gifts on the one body of Christ, so he enables us to discern the deep unities behind Scripture's many-splendoured diversity. By his guidance we will avoid pitting Scripture against Scripture - "I am for John's gospel", "I am for Paul", "I am for the prophets".

So Scripture needs to be re-read and re-appropriated afresh in every age - but without that self-importance which regards all earlier generations as benighted. In so doing, the Church retains the integrity of its own Reformed confession - that the Word of God in Scripture is the supreme rule of faith and life. It will resist downgrading it, as though it were solely a human work, now rather outmoded, and also resist splitting it asunder, so that its diversity eclipses its unity. And the Scottish Church should humbly take note, in its sad decline, that growing Churches in many parts of the world view debates like this one with a mixture of bewilderment, dismay and pity. If Scripture is not incontrovertibly clear on these issues, they wonder, is it really clear on anything?

INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE TODAY (B)

The human elements in the writing and reading of Scripture

The disciplines brought to bear on the study of Scripture in the last two hundred years show how deeply culturally conditioned the particular parts of Scripture are. Books, passages, editorial

strands, all belong to identifiable times, communities, theological perspectives. To understand the biblical witness in a way which does any justice to the historical nature of God's self-revelation, one has to understand the economic, political, social and cultural factors in which the biblical texts first saw the light of day. [See Walk, My Sister. The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives (World Alliance of Reformed Churches)] To hear the Word of God through these writings is not necessarily to identify with the particular standpoint of the writer. For example, some of the very nationalistic writings of the late Old Testament period, such as Esther, may be "Word of God" to us by standing as a salutary warning against the standpoint they embody.

We are increasingly aware that all reading of Scripture is undertaken from a particular vantage point. As we seek to approach it in the light of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we bring (often unconsciously) to the Bible's record of the past the complexity of our own present: our thought forms, our training, our language, our social position etc. People in positions of power are likely to read - or at least to hear - Scripture differently from those who read it in a situation of oppression. They are also likely to have different favourite passages! This importance of the reader's own perspective has been borne in on us in the late twentieth century by the liberation theologies and by the worldwide voice of Christian feminism. We should not be afraid to confront such insights, even if we find them threatening. Nor should we feel that the large library of Bible books has to be invested with false cohesion and unity. It has been a constant emphasis of the classic Reformed position that Scripture becomes the Word of God for us in a dynamic interaction between text, reader and Spirit.

Once we recognise the human elements in our own handling of Scripture, a question arises as to whether those within the Bible were safeguarded from possible distorted understanding of God, or whether they share with us that possibility. In other words, does God in the richness of the Scriptures let us see bad theology as well as good for our edification? Not only must we ask, in the light of historical and critical work, "Does Luke have a different picture of Christ from John?" or "Does Galatians have a different account of the Church from I Timothy?" We may also be invited by God to ask which is better? That is to say that within Scripture, as well as outside it, writers, editors, scribes, Church leaders may have elements in their understanding which come not directly from God but mediated through their intellectual and social horizons, the point they had reached on their own spiritual pilgrimage, their place in contemporary power struggles and so on. To try to distinguish the elements that are merely local from those which are vital perceptions of faith is not to spurn or downgrade Scripture as God's irreplaceable gift to his Church. It is to recognise in Scripture a warning that we must try to make the same distinction in the ways that we articulate our faith.

The ongoing disclosure of God's truth

There is always a risk that we select the things we like and avoid what we do not like. But that risk does not absolve us from the responsibility of some prioritising and evaluation. Scripture bears witness to a Gospel which in turn demands that Scripture itself be judged by that Gospel. It was this kind of understanding, the sense that we have to engage and grapple with the written text, which allowed Luther to describe the Epistle of James as "a right strawy epistle," and emboldened Mary Slessor to write in her Bible alongside I Timothy 2:11, "Na, na, Paul, this winna dae".

God's self-revelation in the teaching and life and death of Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, is our decisive and ultimate authority. But the historical nature of that supreme revelation does not require us to believe that he has been inactive in other places and times. Through the work of his Spirit in history and culture, we have access now to questions that are never raised within Scripture itself. Comparative anthropology suggests that the semitic and Graeco-Roman cultures which cradled Christianity were so deeply patriarchal that they stifled the potential radical thrust of Jesus' teaching. That patriarchal social structure is now challenged as unacceptable by both secular and Christian feminists - by the secular on grounds of natural justice, by the Christian because it fails to express the equal status of Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free within the Kingdom. The biblical witness has been compared to a slow-burning fuse penetrating history and culture, then every so often igniting into new disclosures of the implications of the gospel which the Church and world were not ready for before. Obvious examples of this would be the emancipation of slaves and the ordination of women. On the same pattern, many Christians believe that psychology's insights into the nature and place of sexuality are also God-given. They provide a valuable corrective to the way that Scripture had

been filtered through subsequent ascetic traditions - resulting during much of Christian history in distorted, negative and guilt-inducing messages about the God-given gift of human sexuality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY (A)

The centrality of heterosexual monogamy in Scripture

Quite recently some Christians have begun to argue that the prominent and normative place in Scripture of heterosexual monogamous marriage is, in effect, wholly or largely a reflection of ancient social and cultural patterns. These time-bound wrappings must be discarded if we are to uncover God's Word for sexual relationships today. That Word speaks, so it is claimed, about qualities such as love and freedom, rather than about forms of relationship, such as heterosexual monogamy.

Many Christians believe that it speaks about both qualities and forms - and neither one without the other. Honour among thieves does not justify thieving, though the honour may still be admirable, just as love shown in wrongly ordered relationships may be admirable. The distinction is critical: adulterous partnerships can be very loving, and so too can incestuous ones. Similarly the form of marriage can be an empty shell without mutual love and caring. Yet the fact that the form is God-given means that difficulties in the relationship have to be faced and worked through rather than run away from.

This divine plan for men and women to find sexual fulfilment in permanent one-to-one relationships holds a critical structural place in the biblical revelation: established in creation, assumed in the Ten Commandments, reaffirmed and deepened by Jesus, and seen in Ephesians as uniquely symbolic of the union between Christ and his Church. It is against this extensive backcloth that homosexual behaviour is uniformly condemned in the Bible, not frequently (the issue rarely arose, and in any case was never really in doubt) but in remarkably comprehensive terms which most discussions have still not taken seriously.

Some call this teaching "heterosexism" - an ideology which judges others by heterosexual norms. This charge should certainly remind us of the honourable status that singleness (including celibacy and virginity) has in the New Testament, supremely in Jesus himself. But "heterosexism" may be no more than a label affixed to others by those unable to assent to biblical teaching. It is hard to deny that the Bible presents an inescapably heterosexual norm.

Responding to homosexuality

Something similar may be said of allegations of "homophobia" (literally, "fear of the same"). It is indeed true that some Christians react to homosexuality only with distaste or revulsion - which makes it very difficult for them to love their homosexual neighbours as themselves. Most churches would benefit from more explicit, unembarrassed teaching on sexual issues. But "homophobia" is too often used as a kind of emotive stigma, especially when linked to someone else's supposed problems with his or her own sexuality. We all know how challenging it is to love people whose lifestyle we deeply disapprove of, especially when it is unashamedly flaunted so that it becomes basic to their identity. Yet we do not normally devise labels, for instance for those who instinctively shrink from alcoholics. Some seem determined to label as homophobic any disapproval of same-sex behaviour, whether instinctive gut-reaction or thoughtful principle. The use of the term adds nothing to productive discussion.

What of homosexual orientation? There is as yet no scientific consensus about the causes - whether nature or nurture or some combination of both. But if conclusive proof of its genetic basis is forthcoming (clarification will be welcome on all sides) that will not settle questions of Christian ethics. What is "natural" is not automatically right, as the doctrine of the fall reminds us. The Christian faith has never accepted that every innate disposition may validly express itself in outward behaviour. Each case has to be assessed on its merits. Human beings are more than the sum of their genes, and cannot be deprived of responsibility for their own lives.

The Christian ideal of marriage (heterosexual, monogamous, permanent - one man and one woman for life, with no sex before or outside it) has remained remarkably resilient. It has survived enormous changes in social custom, ceremonial expression, legal status, economic conditions, and human expectations. It will outlive not only the decline of the traditional - and expensive - church-wedding-and-reception, but also the impatience of today's sexual liberators. For the wisdom of God is greater and he knows best how his children best live.

But for all who struggle with the effects of broken relationships or disordered sexuality - and that means most of us - God holds out the gift of forgiveness and the renewing power of the Spirit. All of us need both, and none of us is beyond the reach of either.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY (B)

The complexity of marriage as a social institution

It is the recognition that unreformed attitudes and cultural blinkers are found within Scripture, as well as beyond it, which has given rise to specific questions about marriage and sexuality in many contemporary churches. No-one who takes the gospel seriously can fall into the trap of thinking that traditional religion is always right, or that piety is always an expression of the mind of Christ.

There is a huge cultural gap between marriage in any middle-Eastern setting in Bible times and our own idea of it as a partnership of equals in which each freely chooses the other. Honesty compels us to recognise how often men have regulated female sexuality in ways which reinforce patriarchal control. We know the sordid under-history of recent periods of "morality" - the extent of prostitution in Victorian times, the growing evidence of child abuse committed before the so-called sexual revolution. We can only guess at the number of partners trapped in miserable marriages in days when the outward form of a relationship was held more important than the actual relationship, and divorce for most was not a social or an economic possibility. A secure and permanent marriage, involving total commitment and absolute trust and fidelity, is not a goal confined to Christians, nor is it a prize awarded to Christians. Many couples who do not believe in God enjoy such marriages; many Church members, in spite of great effort and perseverance, do not. Christians are greatly blessed in being able to bring to their relationship all the resources that faith provides, through the constant forgiveness and renewal mediated by the Holy Spirit, also through their shared worship and devotional life. Undoubtedly the Bible sets forth marriage as the norm for male-female relationships (though in the much-quoted Creation story Adam and Eve can hardly be said to have had much choice!) But it would be arrogant to claim belief in marriage as a distinctively Christian insight or to pretend that it represents a division between a faithful Church and a godless world. We have to acknowledge with contrition that sometimes the repressive, guilt-inducing upbringing provided by "Christian" parents becomes a powerful factor in their children's later marital problems. The sins of one generation are indeed too often visited upon the next.

An increasingly common cause of unease is the Church's relation to couples who live together before marrying, or without ever marrying. This course - familiar to many parents and to almost all pastors - is often carefully and deliberately chosen by couples who believe that it is the appropriate response to where their relationship has reached. The biblical norm of chastity before marriage seems to them to belong to a world in which contraception was insecure, marriage often took place at the age of puberty, and economic and social structures were radically different from ours. If it is for the sake of legitimate sex that people marry, this is not an adequate basis for a promising relationship. If, with or without sexual encounter, the desire for shared life, mutual cherishing and mutual joy is constant, then it is that commitment which is the real core of the marriage.

[The question of premarital cohabitation, and the tension it can cause within families, is dealt with at greater length in the dialogue on page .. below]

Sexual orientation and its expression

The twentieth century has made us aware in a new way of the wide range of human sexual orientation. Whether homosexuality is a fact of nature from birth or the product of conditioning in early

years is still debated; but most Lesbian women and gay men testify to having been aware of a same-sex orientation at an early age, and nearly always against the social pressures of their family, community, culture etc. The stronger the disapproval, the more difficult it can be for the homosexual to achieve any sense of wellbeing or self-respect. Orientation is very seldom a matter of choice.

Traditionally, the Church has not encouraged much discussion of the subject. Nor has it seen much need to reinforce condemnation with argument. Texts have been produced from Leviticus or Romans to show that same-sex relations are wrong ... because they are wrong ... as if that were all that needed to be said. "Unnatural" is a word often used in this context. (Two generations ago the same label was applied to left-handed children.) Some Christians believe the orientation itself should be seen as a handicap, comparable to some of the other genetic deficiencies which are part of the mystery of evil. Many committed gay and Lesbian Christians, however, do not see their disposition as evil; they see it as a positive, though minority, gift of God - to be enjoyed as part of the fullness of life which heterosexuals are entitled to enjoy; and some do commit themselves to a relationship as permanent and as "monogamous" as the best marriages.

The theological question is whether, if two men or two women love each other with the kind of commitment that would lead them to live together permanently, their sexual desire is to be taken as part of that love, and physically expressed; or whether they must abstain from all physical love. Abstinence has in the past been seen as the only appropriate Christian course, and some are able to accept a commitment to chastity as a difficult but worthy vocation. Others find themselves living a permanent struggle between guilt and desire, accepting this conflict as an inexplicable cross they must attempt to bear.

There are Lesbian and gay Christians, however, who see it as a denial of justice, freedom and equality that lifelong celibacy or solitariness should be imposed on them, because of an orientation they did not choose, by others who claim for themselves the right to enter into a fulfilling relationship without any guilt. Heterosexism (in effect claiming virtue for heterosexual relationships and condemning those which are different) is perceived as a real fact and a real threat by many who cannot conform to the heterosexual norm; though, like sexism and racism, it is often an unconscious attitude. Homosexuals also encounter much irrational hostility - "gay-bashing" can be verbal as well as physical - from heterosexuals, often related to the fear of acknowledging any same-sex attraction in their own heterosexual make-up. One current psycho-sexual theory is that for most people sexuality is not a fixed absolute, homosexual or heterosexual, but that we all inhabit a more graded spectrum, most of us with the capacity of some sexual ambivalence. In the majority of people social and cultural influences reinforce their own self-development in nudging them towards the heterosexual end of their own spectrum. For some, this turns out to be impossible, or is resisted as unwarranted social engineering.

The need for ongoing reflection

For Christians who believe that anything from Scripture overrides anything learned since Scripture was written, there is no need to linger on the question of homosexual relationships. There are texts which condemn homosexual practices, there are none which commend them, so no more need be said.

The texts however are few, and their contexts hardly comparable to the long-term faithful partnerships under discussion. In Graeco-Roman society, which was the background to Paul's letters, homosexual relations were almost a social convention, seen as quite compatible with having a wife and family. Whether Paul would have viewed the matter differently if he had been able to conceive of "monogamous" homosexual partnerships, or if he had known what we now know about sexual orientation, remains a speculative question; but it is a legitimate question.

The Church's traditional preoccupation with people's sexual lives and their irregularities seems to many to have been out of all proportion to the amount of concern Jesus expressed about them. It is a suspect preoccupation because it diverts attention from some of his more central concerns about forgiveness, generosity, self-righteousness, judgementalism. Everyone can recognise the need to control behaviour which expresses a pathological and hurtful disposition (e.g. sadism, kleptomania) also behaviour which manipulates those unable to make free adult choices (e.g. paedophilia). Those who have found their lives enriched by gay relationships, however, argue that it begs the question in the

first place to put the initial disposition in a negative light. The way the relationship is handled, and the nurture it offers each partner, is a truer criterion of its worth; and the desire to relate in bodily wholeness to another human being is as positive in the homosexual as in the heterosexual.

We believe that the Churches are now invited, in the providence of God, to deepen their reflection and understanding in these areas. This will need patience, trust, self-criticism, and genuine openness to where the Spirit of God is leading us. It may also involve pain and conflict. But we cannot turn away from the questions or take refuge in bland platitudes. The issues confronting today's world and today's Church are complex. We will fail both Church and world if we try to evade their complexity.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Ask each member of the group for his/her response. Are the ideas in this paper:
helpful?
disturbing?
confusing?
illuminating?

Which points, if any, would you like further discussion about?

Does God teach us through life experience, scientific knowledge, social change, as well as through Scripture? How do we deal with situations where they seem to conflict?

Scripture, Sex and Responsibility

If a man has intercourse with a man as with a woman, both commit an abomination. They must be put to death; their blood be on their own heads! If a man takes both a woman and her mother, that is lewdness. Both he and they must be burnt, so that there may be no lewdness in your midst. A man who has sexual intercourse with an animal must be put to death, and you are to kill the beast. If a woman approaches an animal to mate with it, you must kill both woman and beast. They must be put to death; their blood be on their own heads!

Leviticus 20: 13-18

The Lord God built up the rib, which he had taken out of the man, into a woman. He brought her to the man, and the man said: "Now this, at last - bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh! This shall be called woman, for from man was this taken." That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Now they were both naked, the man and his wife, but they had no feeling of shame towards one another.

Genesis 2: 22-25

Honour your father and your mother, that you may live long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not commit murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false evidence against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his ass, or anything that belongs to him.

Exodus 20: 12-17

Like an apricot-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among boys. To sit in its shadow was my delight, and its fruit was sweet to my taste. He took me into the wine-garden and gave me loving glances. He refreshed me with raisins, he revived me with apricots; for I was faint with love. His left arm was under my head, his right arm was round me.

Song of Songs 2: 3-6

God has given them up to shameful passion. Among them women have exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and men too, giving up natural relations with women, burn with lust for one another; males behave indecently with males, and are paid in their own persons the fitting wage of such perversion.

Romans 1: 26-27

Surely you know that wrongdoers will never possess the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, no adulterer or sexual pervert, no thief, extortioner, drunkard, slanderer or swindler will possess the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you have been washed clean, you have been dedicated to God, you have been justified through the name of the Lord Jesus and through the Spirit of our God.

"I am free to do anything," you say. Yes, but not everything does good. No doubt I am free to do anything, but I for one will not let anything make free with me. "Food is for the belly and the belly for food," you say. True, and one day God will put an end to both. But the body is not for fornication; it is for the Lord - and the Lord for the body.

I Corinthians 6: 9-13

Jesus said: You have heard that they were told, "Do not commit adultery". But what I tell you is this: If a man looks at a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes your downfall, tear it out and fling it away; it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole of it to be thrown into hell. If your right hand causes your downfall, cut it off and fling it away; it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole of it to go to hell.

Matthew 5: 27-30

Jesus said: Do not judge, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged, and whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye, with never a thought for the plank in your own? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own? You hypocrite! First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's.

Matthew 7: 1-5

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause he pleases?" Jesus responded by asking, "Have you never read that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female?" and he added, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh. It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate." Then why," they objected, "did Moses lay it down that a man might divorce his wife by a certificate of dismissal?" He answered, "It was because of your stubbornness that Moses gave you permission to divorce your wives; but it was not like that at the beginning. I tell you, if a man divorces his wife for any cause other than unchastity, and marries another, he commits adultery."

The disciples said to him, "If that is how things stand for a man with a wife, it is better not to marry."

To this he replied, "That is a course not everyone can accept, but only those for whom God has appointed it. For while some are incapable of marriage because they were born so, or were made so by men, there are others who have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let those accept who can."

Matthew 19: 3-12

Next day about noon... Peter went up on the roof to pray. He grew hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were getting it ready, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened, and something coming down that looked like a great sheet of sailcloth; it was slung by the four corners and was being lowered to the earth, and in it he saw creatures of every kind, four-footed beasts, reptiles and birds. There came a voice which said to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." But Peter answered, "No, Lord! I have never eaten anything profane or unclean." The voice came again, a second time: "It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean." This happened three times, and then the thing was taken up into heaven.

Acts 10: 9-16

Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed we were all brought into one body by baptism, in the one Spirit, whether we are

Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free men, and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink.

I Corinthians 12: 12-13

Look to yourself, each one of you: you may be tempted too. Help one another to carry these heavy loads, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2

Be generous to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4: 32

REFLECT ON THESE PASSAGES.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FIND THEY PRESENT TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD?

JANE

I am a lifelong member of the Church, and when my daughter started living with her boyfriend six years ago, I was shocked. Now they have been together for so long, I'm not so sure that sex without marriage is always wrong. They seem to be as stable, happy and responsible as my husband and I were when we married in sexual innocence thirty years ago. They are not sure if they'll ever marry, but they are firmly committed to this as their most vital and serious relationship. It's started me thinking about how rules in the Bible came to be formed, and I wonder if God could think something was right for people in a certain setting, but not necessarily for everyone always. I've begun to read a bit more about how to interpret Scripture, and I'm amazed at how much there is about it which we never hear about from the pulpit.

JANE

I think the biblical rules about virginity before marriage made a lot of sense in their own day. There were much higher risks of pregnancy, and the need to have secure family structures was a part of the way God shaped his people into such a strong unit, over against their pagan neighbours.

But I also wonder if some of it is to do with a society where men owned women legally: where there tended to be a property-transaction from father to husband around the time of puberty, and anybody else who had slept with the girl had abused her husband's property.

I'm not sure if that all applies when women are their own persons: where they often have years of sexual maturity before being ready to marry, and where there are safe contraceptives to allow responsible avoidance of pregnancy. Maybe the same rules don't quite fit now. I find it hard to know if God means us to use the Bible as a book of absolute rules.

JANE

I still can't take the idea of casual sex, but I don't find I can use a word like fornication for the steady, loving relationship my daughter is in. They thought it out: they're careful about contraception, since they're still not sure if they want children, and how that would affect the relationship. Knowing what we know about world population, I'm sure "Be fruitful and multiply" can't apply to everyone. If I'm honest, I'm not sure that it would add anything to their relationship if they did get married. That's what they say themselves, and I'm not sure if my desire for them to get married is really because I think Bob and I have something they lack, or because I still haven't quite conquered these feelings about "what people think". What I am clear about is that they have a marvellous, trusting, confident, strong relationship which puts many marriages to shame.

JANE

I know in my day it was just taken for granted that decent girls kept themselves for marriage. And I think that did make for a wonderful sense of specialness and tender vulnerability when you first made love. Of course we weren't skilled or experienced, but learning with each other was part of the joy.

My daughter only had one serious boyfriend before Martin, and I think she probably slept with him. But I know she thinks my generation made too much of virginity as an all or nothing thing. She sees more of a continuum of growing towards sexual maturity, with 'losing your virginity' a significant step, but not the defining watershed between two quite different states of being. I don't know if we made too much of it. Certainly, neither she nor Martin seem to feel cheapened by the other's earlier sexual experience. It would be different, she says, if they slept with anyone else now they are in an established relationship.

JANE

Quite honestly, when I was young nobody mentioned homosexuality, and it never really crossed my mind to expect people to be like that. But I know from the children that in their generation it's much more taken for granted in a relaxed sort of way. I must admit I find the idea of two men or two women in bed fairly disgusting, so I try not to think about it. But I must say too that when I've met some of my daughter's friends whom she tells me are living together, they seem the nicest, most natural, ordinary young people you could meet.

So I suppose it's another place where I've mixed feelings, a bit of a struggle between my instincts and my wish to be fair and tolerant. But I'm sure it's a good thing that these questions are more out in the open, not being brushed under the carpet.

JANE

I've never, since the children were adults, wanted to give them unasked for advice. I did have a lot of long talks with Eleanor when she told me she and Martin were moving in together, but I've never wanted to make her feel unwelcome here, and when they come to stay they share a room. It seems silly to fuss about that when we know they live together. I know my minister thinks we've failed somehow to set the Christian ideal attractively enough, and though he's perfectly civil, they don't think it's his business. They go to a church where there seem to be more young people in their kind of relationship.

I still hope that one day they may feel they want children, and make a public commitment to Christian marriage, but I think at the moment my main concern is to keep all the lines of communication open. And not just for their sakes. We find their openness and honesty and pleasure in each other a real gift to us. It's funny, but that's how it is.

JOHN

I am an elder of the Church of Scotland. I don't think it's up to us to pick and choose what we like and don't like in Scripture and in the Church's constant teaching. I'm sure everyone (especially men) finds continence and fidelity hard, whether or not they're married. But it's God's clear Word: and once we start bending the rules, there is no lifeline to God. I accept the Scriptures as the God-given absolute rule of my life, and that means, "No sex unless it's with your legally-wedded wife or husband." The alternatives will, sooner or later, lead to social and moral chaos and undermine the fabric of decent society. I can vouch for marriage as the most wonderful gift of God to direct and contain our sexual needs. If that goes, we lose our bearings.

JOHN

The Bible is the inspired Word of God, given to us as our primary source of faith and life. Its message is for all time. If we start to deviate from its clear prohibitions against sex outside marriage, we open the door to casual fornication, adultery and unnatural couplings of men with men and women with women.

The tide of social permissiveness is already ruining basic values of family and society. If we start allowing people discretion and private subjective opinion about what are acceptable relationships in

God's eyes, it's the thin end of the wedge towards the kind of naive, permissive humanism which damages our public life so much. We want to be our own God, and in our arrogance marginalise the Word of God. If we want to avoid complete social and moral disintegration, we must return to God-fearing recognition of his mandates, no matter how difficult these are to maintain.

JOHN

I don't think God is changed by developments in science or medicine or social man-made patterns - otherwise, God gets squeezed into smaller and smaller 'gaps'.

I don't think using contraceptives makes a relationship more responsible if it seems to make extra-marital sex O.K. in any circumstances. It's the Christian's responsibility to resist any social shift, no matter how popular, unless it is warranted by God's law. That's how we make costly witness.

The point is that God meant us to have our unique and wonderful experience of sexuality only with one person - the person we're faithful to for life. He made us and knows how best we 'work'. Maybe there are 'common law marriages' which fit that, though they're a bit sub-Christian to my way of thinking. But the vast majority of kids seem to think that having sex is O.K. as long as you don't get pregnant or hurt each other. I think you do hurt someone else spiritually by separating sex from total, permanent personal commitment, preferably vowed before God.

JOHN

Chastity is chastity, whether it's for ten months or ten years. It's not about whether it has good or bad psychological effects on those who defend it as a standard. It's simply about what God demands. And that is not, I believe, to protect unborn children, or give a couple a bonus on their wedding night. (Though I think it is a bonus, which no-one who's slept with someone else can recapture.)

It's about us being called to witness in our human male-female relationships to the unswerving fidelity of God, and to live in the image of that. Of course it's costly! Sometimes it may even add to the difficulties early on in marriage, though in the long run I think it adds to the security and trust you have. But many worthwhile things are painful and costly. I believe this is God's wise discipline for us, even if we don't see it in terms of worldly prudence and commonsense. It's our privilege to obey.

JOHN

I think there's a difference between not brushing things under carpets and putting them on pedestals! I don't doubt that some unhappy people are born with a strong tendency to same-sex attraction. But I think they're rare, and would be rarer if there wasn't all this attention given to them, far less celebration, you don't have a 'right' to be diabetic, or to be a paedophile. You just are; and the moral issue is what you do about it!

I think there's strong evidence that God can do miracles in this area, and turn the sexual orientation around. But if he doesn't, then the Christian answer is celibacy. You recognise the disposition, but you resist acting on it, because you know from God's express command that it is not part of his will for his creation that sex should happen in these circumstances. That's no harder for homosexuals than for heterosexual Christians who, for one reason or another, can't marry, and therefore have to renounce sex for the sake of the Gospel, as Jesus taught.

JOHN

Of course, Christian parents and pastors must never act in ways that reject their children or young people. But we have to maintain the distinction between loving the sinner and deploring the sin. That means, I think, setting limits in the parental home; and making sure that some discipline is exerted in church. Of course sinners (that means all of us!) are welcome to hear the Word of God, so excluding them from church is out of the question. But I'm not sure about communion discipline if there's no

repentance. And I don't think people 'living in sin' should be in any public church office or position of leadership with young people.

Any approach should be made gently and sensitively; and only as a last resort involve public action such as asking for (temporary) resignation. But we must not seem to endorse the laissez-faire standards of the world. That would be a failure in our responsibility for the spiritual welfare of those involved.
PETER

I'm a Church of Scotland minister. From my late teens I knew I was different: and at nineteen I began to realise that there were quite a lot of other gay or bisexual people. Because of the church's teaching and my sense of the Bible's prohibitions, I believed my only options were celibacy or heterosexual marriage, and prayed to God to cure me. I met Jean, and felt a deepening attraction for her, and in the end married her. I still love her as my wife and the mother of my children. At the time, I told her about my instinctive attraction to men, and she's always understood that, and felt uneasy about me cutting off that side of myself. But we agreed not to 'test' each other sexually, and were confident that our mutual love and understanding could, with God's help, take the strain. In spite of our willingness, and a certain amount of early sexual happiness, the marriage is now a disaster. Neither of us is physically satisfied or whole. I feel trapped, dishonest, and lonely. Jean feels the constant pressure of being aware of that. I don't want to leave her. I believe in loyal monogamy. But apart from a couple of close friends, we live behind a façade, and don't know where God is in all of it.

PETER

I find the Bible a wonderful source of challenge, invitation, demand and promise. I couldn't accept myself with the same depth if I didn't know that God accepts and loves me.

To begin with, I thought he accepted and love me in spite of my deviant sexual desires, and would bless me if I submitted these desires to his holy will.

Now I'm not so sure. I begin to wonder if those of us who find our whole sexual nature goes in another direction might obey God by letting that be clear, so long as we witness in our relationships to the virtues of Christian discipleship, faith, hope, charity, love, forgiveness, longsuffering, patience, joy, willingness to receive the least of people, the outcasts.

I know I scare a lot of people when I raise that question, but I can't get away from it. I think it comes from God, and I hear it, over and over again, especially as I read the Gospels.

PETER

As a minister, I've seen marriages work out in lots of different ways: and I've come across several other partnerships, some which seem to survive and flourish even through a lot of adversity, and others which founder and fall apart.

I'm clear that some of the partnerships are about a lot more than mutual gratification. That some of them choose to reject marriage because they see it as a state that often shrivels loving relationships. Sometimes partnerships grow into a feeling that marriage is appropriate later on, say when children are planned.

My own feeling is that it's not 'being married' or 'not being married' that will tend to secure good relationships. It's much more elusive things like genuine self-knowledge, honesty, communication, trust, humour, generosity. It seems to me these are distributed less tidily than the moral codes I learnt seemed to suggest.

PETER

I know I kept the rules I believed were God-given in good faith. Because I had no sexual experience beyond arousal at a distance, I think I confused all that initial desire and excitement with real sexual compatibility. I'm sure you can't prove or test compatibility from a few sexual encounters, but I do wonder if chastity is sometimes irresponsible, if it lets people enter committed relationships with unrealistic hopes. You can't imagine the sense of cul-de-sac as it begins to dawn on you that you can't achieve any deepening sexual life with the person you're committed to live with.

Maybe God was wanting me not to marry, but it didn't feel like that, for me or Jean. So how do you know? And now, I wonder if God might be calling us to part, sadly but lovingly, so that Jean might find a happy sexual relationship before she's too old: and I might risk discovering what it means that God has made me a predominantly gay man. Is that God's call or Satan's?

PETER

When I was younger, I thought God would help me to overcome my instinctive disposition. But he hasn't. Now I sometimes wonder if he rebukes me, like the man with one talent, for burying my talent because I couldn't do with it what the man with ten talents could do!

I wrestle with the Scripture passages that condemn sex between men or women: but I'm not sure that they reflect the voice of God. Jesus said nothing at all about it, but he did say a lot about purity being a matter of the heart's integrity and intentions.

It's clear to me that our society is deeply afraid of its sexual minorities, and I think that was maybe also true of the Jewish culture which the Scriptures so deeply belong to. Maybe we have to tackle that fear, and won't know if we're on the right ethical lines till we are sure we're not reacting in sheer homophobia. I think that Jesus is better than his church here.

PETER

The longer I've been a minister, the less 'discipline' has seemed to me to fit the model of Jesus' ministry.

I think there was always example; there was challenge, teasing, getting at what was going on under the surface. There was a vision of the Kingdom. And sometimes there was rebuke and denunciation. But what was most fiercely and constantly denounced seems to me to have been self-righteousness, and the sense of being entitled or able to judge others.

I think I've been a better minister as I've got less sure about how to demarcate the righteous and the unrighteous. I've learned more by listening, by finding glimpses of God in unexpected places and people. I think God can look after the judgement of us all. Our ministry is about making the love more evident.

MARK

I think the church is basically hung-up about sex, and sends people on guilt-trips by misusing the Bible to support its hang-ups. My community is the radical Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. I've left the official church I belonged to, because I think even the open, sympathetic people in it can't really alter the dominant moralising of the institution. I'm sure God's gift of sex is much more varied and diverse than the church can face yet. I know that's a minority view which shocks many people, but I think it always needs one or two pioneering spirits to start calling for any significant change. Then, decades later maybe, they're recognised as prophets.

MARK

It seems clear to me that all through Scripture you have battles going on between conservative and radical mentalities. You have the priestly law-making defenders of the Jewish cult, and you have the prophets saying "Stuff your legalism, do you care for the poor?" You have the Pharisees with all their

scruples, and Jesus saying "It's not what you eat or do on the Sabbath that counts, it's loving God and your neighbour." You have the Jerusalem Church sliding into legalism, and Paul blowing them up. Scripture demands we take sides. We can't sit on the fence pretending it's all harmonised. For me, it's the radical option that is faithful for the free Spirit of God.

MARK

I know too many people whose relationships are responsible to believe any longer that only monogamy is right. Of course, one basic element in responsibility is safe sex, but there's more to it than that. I think responsible relationships are ones where both people know what they're doing; aren't playing games with one another; have talked out the implications; agree about what each expects and hopes for; and are in basic agreement about the ground-rules - e.g. whether this is an exclusive relationship or not; whether it's seen as a permanent partnership, and so on. Once that's been honestly dealt with, I think there's a huge range of responsible relationships. It's ridiculous of married heterosexuals to be superior about other sexual relationships which often produce just as much fulfilment.

MARK

I think chastity's a pretty outdated virtue, if you just mean sexual inexperience. I'm sure there are times in people's lives when they need space, to discover or re-discover the integrity of their own bodies and spirits. And sometimes sexual abstinence may help that. But I think for Jesus, radical chastity was a question of purity of heart, of single-mindedness in one's love, of avoiding not sex, but all forms of abusive love, exploitation, possessiveness, power-games etc. People can have had lots of sexual experience in several relationships and be chaste: and some people who are technically virgins can be as unchaste as Casanova.

MARK

It's absolutely clear to me that you can't think of sexual orientation as an absolute given, a black or white state of affairs.

I think we all exist somewhere along a continuum which has elements of masculine and feminine in it. Jung is helpful here. For some people, both men and women, the male components are dominant, for others the female. And for some, who find themselves in a state of bisexual poise, neither is dominant. But all of this is affected, right from birth, by cultural elements of nurture, education, ethics etc, which are liable to structure our sexuality in relation to public or family constraints and pressures. If these serve to alienate us from our true orientation, they need to be challenged.

MARK

I find the whole idea of adults in a free relationship being "disciplined" quite insulting and repugnant. Who's entitled to intrude, especially in such an intimate and private decision between two consenting adults?

If the church would grow up, it would have the maturity to listen and learn from the experience of actual people, instead of imposing abstract rules and expectations on people.

It's the pressures to conform, both stated and unstated, which drive so many Christian youngsters to despair in the area of sexuality.

Jesus said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." I don't think the church believes that.

ANNE

I'm well aware that my non-Christian friends think I'm odd, but I'm determined not to have sex until I'm married. I've had a couple of boyfriends, but I've always made it clear to them where I stand, and they've respected that. I think an awful lot of teenage and young adult sex is through peer group pressure.

My friends tend to think Christianity in general is off, so I expect to be in a minority when it comes to moral standards. But for me there can only be one place for sex, which is the closest contact you can have with someone else - and that's marriage. I hope God gives me that fulfilment some day - but if not, I'd rather stay faithful and celibate than go against his will for my life.

ANNE

It's the Bible that keeps me strong in my resistance to pre-marital sex, because I find that over and over again the issue is about "not being conformed to the world" - and it's in the New Testament especially that I see what that means, and how much it costs. Also the theme of God blessing those who don't chase their own selfish needs, but obey his will.

Obviously I find it hard sometimes when I get teased about being scared or uptight, but I think that quite a lot of people really do respect me for having principles based on my faith, so it's not a problem really. And I get a lot of support from my parents and other Christians.

ANNE

I think basically my body is not my own to do what I like with. I have it on trust, and a responsible relationship is one in which I remember that, and don't get carried away. If I meet someone who doesn't share my basic Christian outlook, I'm not honestly very likely to get anywhere near an intimate relationship with them. I am absolutely sure that Christians should only marry Christians, though I suppose God sometimes converts one partner through the other, if the husband or wife has become a Christian after the marriage. So for me, I'm clear it's safer to stick to young people who share my sense of responsibility under God. That means sticking to sexual limits until the friendship has ripened into marriage.

ANNE

I find this the area of biggest pressure from all the stuff around me, that I've not really grown-up till I've had some experience of sexual intercourse.

But I don't actually get the feeling that friends I know who've slept with each other are any more mature than me. I don't even think they're any more passionate (though that's the claim they make of course).

It's just that I do think my chastity is a kind of gift to offer back to God until such time as he lets me offer it to the man I marry - for whom I hope it will also be a gift. It's like the sense of giving someone the firstfruits - nothing could be more special. I don't want to reduce that by making intercourse more trivial.

From the Board of Social Responsibility:

The Rev. Ann Ballentine

The Rev. James Cowie

From the Board of Parish Education: The Rev. David G. Hamilton