

Dear .....

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..... .... I think that you were correct when you said that perhaps we would not see eye to eye on the issue of sexual orientation and our faith - I suspect we will not. I am therefore not going to go through what you wrote issue by issue as I differ profoundly on most points and I do not think that it would serve any purpose.

I think that we are both motivated by the same ultimate objective - to be faithful to Jesus - but our approaches are very different and may be irreconcilable, which is fine with me - I think that God's kingdom is sufficient to accommodate us both in His mercy.

The nature of Scripture is such that we all are continuously interpreting it, from whatever tradition we come. I come from an evangelical tradition which holds to the authority of scripture as inspired by God. I have read the Bible daily most of my life - it is first and foremost a pointer to the living Word who is a person, not a book. We all, whether a Bible believing 'fundamentalist' or a 'liberal' make judgments continuously about what we believe the bible to be saying on different issues. Some issues seem clearer than others, on some issues we have moved from being under the old covenant to the new, other issues remain unchanged. In some cases we have changed our views from what was the norm in Jesus' time and the early church – we no longer stone people, we eat pigs, we permit divorced people and women to minister in our churches, we no longer accept slavery. We ALL make decisions.

For me the Bible is not a detailed road map which tells me at each juncture of my life whether to go left or right, or to carry straight on. Rather it is a compass which tells me the direction in which to go and requires me to make a responsible decision each step of the way for which I am accountable. On our journey of faith we have the Bible (which provides a broad pointer to the ways of God culminating in what Jesus said and did), we have God's Spirit within us, we have our minds and consciences, we have the fellowship of believers and we have tradition to help us discern the way ahead and what is right and wrong. I can never stand before Jesus at some time in the future and justify how I behaved toward this person or that person based solely on what one or two verses in the bible say. I cannot say "the Bible told me so" to justify myself – that is precisely what our Lord accused the Pharisees of – they sought to follow the letter of the law and not the Spirit. It is an abdication of our responsibility to work out our faith for which we alone are accountable.

One of the points raised in the discussions at the SUIIS weekend was a reference to homosexuality being considered as an abomination through thousands of years of Hebrew culture. This I find to be one of the least plausible arguments for continuing to hold homosexuality as an abomination today. Which other aspects of biblical Hebrew 'culture' do we maintain today – the wholesale genocide of entire peoples, slavery, an eye-for-an-eye legal system, polygamy, concubinage, levirate marriage, endogamy, extirpation (being 'cut off' through stoning, burning, strangling, flogging or banishment) for such things as having sex during the menstrual period, all the laws and regulations relating to what is 'clean' and 'unclean', and a whole lot of other things which today we find utterly appalling. These were not only related to the ancient tribes of Israel but were also held in Jesus' time. The response may well be that these things were necessary then in a primitive era when God's people needed to survive in a hostile environment but are not necessary today in a modern era. PRECISELY – choices have been made, issues have been weighed up and rationalized as they must be – decisions have been made on what parts of scripture apply today

and what parts do not, or what parts we now see differently in the light of Jesus' teachings and the weight of the New Testament and the church's tradition and teaching since the New Testament era. On what basis do we justify holding on to some aspects of Hebrew culture today and not others? I submit that it is based solely on what we feel comfortable with – on what fits our current 'world view'. I won't use the terminology of what we choose to jettison or to retain as being a result of our prejudices because that is too pejorative a term to use at this point in the discussion. On what basis do we retain some aspects of Hebrew culture such as the abomination of homosexuality and abandon national genocide or polygamy or slavery? On the basis of what Jesus taught, although he did not mention homosexuality? On the basis of what Paul taught, although we do not all remain celibate as he urged and we have changed our views on divorce, the role of women and slavery, to mention just a few?

The fact is that scripture is not a precise road map which provides us with unequivocal instructions about what to do in every situation – we are required as part of our faith to make decisions and be accountable for our actions, how we view others, what we do to them and what we neglect to do for them.

After some reflection I acknowledge that there are a very small number of passages in the Bible which do condemn homosexuality. There is no point in trying to argue them away or deny their existence. There may be some merit in going through these verse by verse – most of the 'clobber verses' do not condemn homosexual love but rather rape, inhospitality and, above all, idolatry. The number of verses which are 'inescapable' number less than the fingers of one hand. There are a substantially larger number of verses which permit a range of sexually related behavior which we no longer consider Christian. One of the old testament passages condemning homosexual acts requires that homosexuals be put to death. We make decisions – most Christians who condemn homosexuality today would not consider it a Biblical imperative to kill homosexuals – we make a decision that one half of the verse is to be followed but not the other – we are responsible before God for those decisions and their implications and impacts on people's lives because all of our decisions have consequences.

After much reflection, over a number of years, I have come to the conclusion that the few verses which relate to the condemnation of homosexuality in the bible need to be regarded in the same light as other aspects of human life which have changed over the centuries such as slavery, racism, polygamy, concubinage, levirate marriage, endogamy etc. I do not make claims to pseudo scholarship, to a deep mining of the original meaning of proof texts etc. I make a decision for which I take full responsibility that for me, in line with my understanding of the over-riding imperative of Jesus' love, grace and mercy; homosexuality is not an abomination and that sexual orientation plays absolutely no part in how God views anyone. Sexual behavior in terms of love, respect, faithfulness, fidelity, monogamy and consent applies to all regardless of orientation. I do not believe I can use my faith to demand of some people what I am not prepared to accept myself with regards to intimacy and celibacy. I believe that all faithful, loving, long-term relationships should be accorded the same status, dignity and acknowledgement in society and the church regardless of the gender of the two parties. I do not understand how according same-sex couples the right to be married undermines marriage or does anything other than reinforce the institution of family life – in fact the opposite is true.

This decision is based on my understanding of the wholeness of Scripture (particularly the supremacy of God's love, His redeeming work and the Good News), what my conscience tells me based on my experience of life, my understanding of the prompting of the Holy Spirit in my life, the

teachings and life of Jesus (especially his special care and attention to the outcasts and socially unacceptable of his society), the traditions of the church, the findings of science and the growing understanding of those with whom I am in fellowship (but clearly not all).

Although it is my hope, it is not my expectation that all my Christian brothers and sisters will agree. All I request is that we all realize that unless we follow every single dot and letter of scripture, we are each of us making decisions on our own interpretation of the bible every day for which we are accountable. More importantly we are consequently making decisions of how we view and relate to others for whom Christ died, for which we are accountable. As I said on the SUIS weekend, even though my ultimate redemption is secure through what Jesus achieved for all of humanity, I believe we will be called to account for the grace which we have received and on that day I would rather be found wanting for having loved too much or for being naive with regards to this issue than of being so concerned for the law that it trumped love, despite all my protestations that "I loved the sinner but not the sin" – a hollow convenience of the worst kind and a cruel heresy if ever I heard one.

Paul it actually does not matter to me what your views are on homosexuality - we are all responsible for our own beliefs. I care very much though that a large section of the population, because of views like yours, regard the church as a hostile, judgmental, self-righteous environment where they are not welcome unless they repent and change according to those views. This is a shrunken and embittered aberration of the Gospel and not at all what Jesus preached. All the pseudo academic justifications and rationalizations for the continued discrimination against homosexuals and lesbians sound very similar to what we went through with apartheid and what happened nearly 200 years ago around the question of slavery . Just as has happened in those struggles, I have no doubt at all that ultimately truth, justice, wholeness and Grace will win out and future generations of God fearing, Bible loving Christians will look back and wonder how it was that such plainly un-Christian views and practices could have been held in a more primitive and brutal time.

Until that time, you know where I stand.

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Blessings,

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