

**Methodist Church in Ireland**  
**Working Party on Human Sexuality**  
**Symposium on Human Sexuality and Biblical Interpretation**  
*Saturday 17th February 2018*

**Transcript of a talk given by Revd Canon Vaughan Roberts**

*Welcome from Ms Gillian Kingston:*

Gentlemen, brothers and sisters even. We are delighted to welcome to the podium the Revd Canon Vaughan Roberts. Vaughan has studied in Cambridge; done student ministry in South Africa; moved to Oxford and hasn't been able to drag himself away from there; having studied there, now you are in St Ebbes as the rector. He directs the Proclamation Trust, and in his spare time (what spare time I find myself asking) he writes books and plays tennis and golf; that will endear you to some among us, particularly the golf bit.

*Vaughan Roberts:*

Thank you very much. I actually play tennis, not as you know it, because I play not lawn tennis, but real tennis; and unfortunately you can't play in this island as I don't think there is a single real tennis court on the island of Ireland as far as I know. If you want to know what that's about, ask me afterwards. But it's probably not our main subject for today.

Thank you for inviting me! I appreciate the invitation, and I take it we're all united in recognising that this is a very important subject to address. It's an important subject in our culture and clearly what's been happening has been massive cultural change over the years. I was born in 1965, and only in 1967 were homosexual acts between men made legal over the age of 21, and since that time, very dramatic change, particularly I think, since about 2002. So these are very important issues in our culture that have to be addressed. Clearly, they're important issues evangelistically. How does the church relate to a culture that is changing so dramatically? This is a very important issue pastorally because in our churches are people, and as we know from our own experience of life, personally and engaging with others; people are complex, and all the issues that are going on in the culture, are going on in our lives and in our churches' lives. This is a very important issue personally; and I've no doubt, and already one or two of you have spoken to me, that you come here not just thinking, "Oh, it's a very interesting issue to debate, as to how the Methodist Church relates to them", but these are very personal issues for you. Maybe because of loved ones. It could be members of your family who are engaging with issues of sexuality, very profoundly, personally; perhaps they've felt damaged and hurt by the church; maybe your own personal battle, struggles, awareness of what's going on in your own life. I have been open for quite a while now about my own same-sex attraction, and I speak from that context. I don't say that, though, as a kind of bullying thing to start off with. I think it's very important we don't feel that only those who claim a particular perspective are able to speak on these issues. And for many years, close friends and family were aware this was a personal issue for me, but I didn't think it was appropriate to tell the world. I'd never define myself by my sexuality. I didn't want anyone else to define myself by that way. But I got tired of being accused of homophobia for taking, as I do, a traditional view on this subject; of being accused of being unthinking, and unaware of the personal complexity, pain and struggle involved. And, inevitably, no one is fully aware of anyone else's struggle and pain. I don't pretend that just because I experience same-sex attraction, have done for many, many years, that I know what it's like for someone else in a different setting. But I'm simply saying, I'm not coming as an objective individual, as if any of us can be purely objective, on this or any other matter. I'm not coming to unthinkingly, and unfeelingly just, spout clobber texts at people, without realising that, I'm an individual with my own personal struggles, experience and I'm speaking to individuals of different struggles and experience.

The argument for change is a strong one, which is strongly put, and as I hear it, it's expressed under three main headings: Moral, Biblical and Pastoral. I want to address each of them briefly, from the perspective of the Bible. And as all the speakers, I'm sure, would say today, 30 minutes is a limited time to deal with what are hugely complex issues.

### The Moral Argument for Change

When I was a younger person, I think in Britain, the general culture was, that sex was for heterosexual relations, and actually even, many would think, for marriage. That was the kind-of default position when I was a kid, from many, many people. The weird thing about committed Christians was they actually took it seriously and really try to live it in a particularly excessive kind of way. If any Christians were taking a traditional view on these matters, they were goody two shoes, because they really, really tried to live it, but it was generally assumed that this was the right moral position. I've found in recent years, that holding a traditional position, has made me in the eyes of many, immoral! That this is not just my position, not just excessive morality, but it has become immoral, and offensive, and almost heretical in the culture. The argument from morality; the immorality of the traditional position, and therefore a moral argument for change, partly would use equality as a basis. So, we're all equal: men and women, black and white, gay and straight. I hope we agree; I can't believe we are going to have an argument on that, and so all equal – absolutely! Therefore, and this is where it's questioned, there should be equal rights, equal marriage! And that it seemed to me, to be a false step biblically. I should just question Galatians 3:28; now I'm not going to question Galatians 3:28; I believe it firmly, but in terms of interpretation, what Paul is talking about there; the debate is; who are the true heirs of God? Who inherits the blessings of God? Well it was Jews, who were the heirs of God! And then Paul is saying, actually in Christ, we are all the heirs of God! In Christ, in fact, we're all sons of God! Because whether you like it or not, in that culture, it was the son who was the heir! And so he's not saying, that as the translation says, we're all children of God; we're all sons of God! It's not a sons and daughters. A lot of the gender specific language in the New Testament is rightly translated male and female, brothers and sisters! But in that case, I think, we're all sons of God; because we're all heirs of God! And the miracle is, yes, men and women, Jew and Gentile, slave and free: all heirs of God! And so, I don't think this has a bearing on sexual behaviour at all. It's not a relevant text to that.

But also, an assumption behind the argument from equality, is that sexuality is the equivalent to maleness and femaleness; to being black or white. As if, you're either born gay or straight; in a kind-of binary view: some people born gay, and it's just an absolute fixture, and this is the way God has made you, and so to discriminate on the basis of sexuality in terms of marriage, and so on, is unjust. It seems to me, that is an outdated view of sexuality, that even the gay movement now is increasingly moving from, and the church is trying to catch up when it's talking about that! There are some people, and I know friends of mine, who would say that the all through their lives, from childhood onwards, they felt different. And whether they've been able to use the language of gay, straight or whatever, they felt different, and when they fit hit puberty it's become sexualised, but they've always felt different. And for them, the kind of 'gay gene' explanation of gayness just fits. There are plenty of others for whom that is not the reality. For me, I didn't feel particular different. I only became aware of same-sex attraction, really in my early teens. For me there was some degree of attraction to the opposite sex, and I assumed that would grow, and the attraction to the same sex would decline, or even disappear. The opposite happened. And I don't have opposite sex attraction now. I've known others, for whom same-sex attraction just emerged out of nowhere, in a very profound way, in a particular relationship, later in life. There's a huge variety! And you may know that, in a recent significant survey, for the first time in Britain last year amongst young adults, the majority placed themselves not at as it were, 0 to 10 on the sexuality scale, but the majority said they were somewhere along the spectrum of recognising within themselves some degree of both opposite

and same-sex attraction. So this binary view is not the case! How sexuality emerges is highly complex. It seems to me entirely likely that there is some genetic element that makes some people more disposed toward same-sex attraction than others, but it's not genetically programmed. Twin studies make it very clear that where you get identical twins with the same genetic make-up, and it is not as straightforward as always that they have the same sexuality. The other moral argument comes from the point of view of rights. And it seems to me it's coming from the perspective of our culture. And we said quite a lot about the need to recognise the culture we're coming from. Certainly, a conservative culture, an unthinking conservative culture, needs to be challenged by Scripture. But so does the view of the world in which we live in, which is a very powerful view, which has been described as a kind of expressive individualism. And there is a view within our culture, (which is in the air we breathe). It's been described as the moral wallpaper of our world. The primacy of self-expression, and certainly amongst younger adults and young people, that's a very profound assumption, and high value. That no one has the right to tell me who I am; to tell me what I should believe; tell me how I should live. And self-expression, and self-identity is paramount. That is the authority! So, I can define myself according to my sexuality, or gender. I can recreate myself. And this identity must be preserved; this self-identity. Now I've got worries; warning bells with that. I saw reference to this in a documentary in Scotland this week on polyamory, and what was very interesting was the language that was used: "It's who I am!" said one person in a polyamorous relationship. So no one should have the right to question polyamorous relationships, because 'It's who I am.' "I'm not made to be monogamous. I'm polyamorous, I love more than one person, so how dare you suggest that we should not recognise polyamorous relationships!" Now this was accused of scaremongering when we said, "Well let's move from marriage of one man and one woman to same-sex marriage"; when people said, "But what about polyamory? Why limit marriage to two people? Why not make it three individuals? Or four? As many as the people like?" That was accused of being scaremongering. But that language: 'It's who I am!', seems to me something we need to watch in our culture; and within ourselves - it goes deep! PlayStation: be whatever you want to be. Burger King: have it your way. Here's the authority of the individual. And that has had a profound effect on our culture; and I would say a negative one. So undoubtedly, there's a lot of mess out there, and a lot of people deeply hurt because of confusion about sexuality and so on. But it's simply not the case, that that is because of (and undoubtedly there's uncaring conservatism, that doesn't recognise mess, complexity, and recognise huge struggle; and where that cannot be expressed, there's a very lonely isolation, and we need to do better) but it's not simply that there's this uncaring conservative, authority structure, and that's the cause of mess. I think that the sexual revolution, so called, since the 1960s, has caused massive pain to individuals, to families, to society as a whole, and that we are in danger of limply echoing it in the name of justice, without thinking, "Actually, there's something we want to push at!" It's driven by this expressive individualism, in which sex is degraded; it becomes about me, and my desires, and my performance, and ironically sex is deified. As C.S. Lewis said, "It's the one thing that is venerated, in a world without veneration." So if I'm about self-authentication, actually, my sexual relationships, my romantic relationships, are fundamental to who I am, and my discovery of personality and fulfilment, and so on. So it's profoundly cruel not to affirm me in my self-identity, and my relationships as I choose to have them. And that's behind a lot of the pushback. And in this world, marriage is redefined. So same-sex marriage did not introduce a completely radical change. In a sense, the change had already been happening and it was a logical step to what had already been happening. In traditional cultures, marriage is a public relationship between a man and a woman, involving a mutual obligation to one another, and to their family and whatever children God may give them, and to society as a whole. And the emphasis is on duty and commitment. Marriage in the 'I world', as it's been called, the world in which the individual dominates, is redefined; it's privatised. Marriage is about two individuals (and by the way, what's to stop it becoming three or

four in years to come) but at the moment it's between two individuals, and the focus is on individuals fulfilling their sexual and emotional needs. The emphasis is on feelings, and so if we don't feel that love towards one another, we owe it to ourselves; I owe it to myself to get out of that relationship. That explains the massive increase in divorce; the massive increase in cohabitation. And so I want to pushback on the moral and say that actually, the legacy of this 'I world' has been profound distress, and what I understand the Bible to be saying is a much better way. But there's not an exclusive pain from those who are feeling that they can't live according to a traditional pattern. The mess caused by this modern way has been disastrous! Huge mental health issues; breakdown of family life. In the parish where I live, very few mother/father families; a lot of kids wondering "Where is dad? Who am I?"; massive confusion!

### The Biblical Argument for Change

The next argument for change is biblical. A word on the authority of the Bible. Not everyone will recognise this, but we need to be honest with ourselves, and say, "Am I committed to what I think the Bible to be saying?" There are plenty, on the more liberal side, who I think have been very honest: Dermot McCulloch, distinguished Professor of Church History at Oxford University (committed to arguing for change in the church) said, "In this, as in much else, the Bible is simply wrong." So, acknowledging, quite honestly, 'the Bible is not in favour of homosexual, sexual relationships. It's just not! But that I think the Bible is wrong, and let's move to a different view.'

If we take the authority of the Bible, we're going to have to stick with it, whether we like it or not. I don't want to start with the 'clobber texts.' For me, the big issue is the big picture of the Bible. The Bible is a story; I happen to believe it's the true story, that explains the world as it is. It begins at the beginning. "In the beginning God..." and he created. And God's design for sex and marriage, as picked up on in the rest of the Bible, is there in those opening two chapters of the Bible: Genesis 1:27, "God made human beings in his image, male and female he created them." We're not just human beings, we're male and female, and our sex is fundamental to who we are!

"Male and female": he created complimentary sexuality. When God made a helper for Adam, he didn't make another man; he made a woman, like him, but different! And then, having made our complimentary sexuality, he instituted marriage as the proper context for its sexual expression. Genesis 2:24. "That's why man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife and they become one flesh." There is the biblical expression of what marriage is, quoted by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 19, quoted by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6. This is the foundational declaration. The man, the woman are made for one another: anatomically – obviously; pro-creatively; and we may presume in deeper ways. And the account in the garden of Eden, the creation of Adam and Eve. Eve, I take it is not simply, in the narrative, created as the helper to cure Adam's aloneness, but so that together they might fulfil the creation mandate: and to procreate. And so, the heart of this understanding of marriage, is a deep combining of two individuals. The two becoming one flesh. And this one flesh union of two different, yet complementary entities, reflects the marriage of Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:32). Where interestingly, Paul says the fundamental marriage is the marriage of Christ and his church, and human marriage is a reflection of that. It's not the other way round. It's not Paul looking at male/female marriage saying, "O, that reminds me, we could say that Christ's relationship with the church is a bit like that." It's the other way round. We've been created for marriage with God. There's something incomplete in all of us, and our sexuality bears witness to that. And the coming of a man and a woman together bears witness to the ultimate relationship for which we've been made. For a marriage to be a parable of Christ and the church, it must be between like and unlike; male and female. Change this arrangement, and you end up distorting the spiritual reality to which it points; alter marriage, and you end up distorting the picture of the Gospel itself!

That as I understand it is the big picture; there's so much more that could be said, but it's not the case that the Bible has no view of what is normative, and what is appropriate in sexual relationships. It's there in Genesis 2, it's referred to by the apostle Paul, and by the Lord Jesus. And all the biblical negatives, flow from the positives! So in the Bible, God is for sex. You might say that the first command in the Bible is, "Have sex!" Be fruitful and multiply, which is very hard to do without having sex, unless you are an amoeba. So, God is for sex; sex is for marriage (the marriage of a man and a woman); and marriage is for life, you might say is the summary of creation and then Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19. There are narrative examples of polygamy for instance, but never described as good, and in fact, the narrative make it very clear that this is messed up; it's not a good way to go. What about the specific texts then? The six or seven passages if you include Judges 19. I think you'd be foolish to base any condemnation of any same-sex activity or relationship on Genesis 19. I think some of the shock behind it is flowing from assumption that homosexual behaviour is wrong, but in and of itself, clearly homosexual rape is not acquainted with a loving same-sex relationship. I would warn people against basing anything simply on that text alone, and the equivalent text in Judges 19. The Levitical texts are often quickly dismissed on the basis, 'Well what about prawns and so on?' Well what do you do with old Testament law? The Lord Jesus, in the sermon on the mount said that not a jot or a tittle should be removed. So it's all the word of God. He said, he fulfilled it all! So, the question is, how should we understand this old Testament law in the light of the coming of Christ, and we're not left on our own in trying to answer that question. And a good rule of thumb is, does this come from a creation principle? Because if it comes from a creation principle, this is not the kind of law that is setting apart the people of Israel as the distinct people of God, that is therefore no longer appropriate once Christ has come, and the people of God becomes Jew and Gentile, like the food laws, for instance. There is no creation principle about not eating prawns. But the Genesis 2 principle of sex is for the marriage of man or woman, is the basis of all the Bible's morality, and that's a creation principle applied in Leviticus. The other principle is, what does the New Testament do with this law? So, when it comes to prawns, the Lord Jesus declared all foods clean. The apostle Paul says, "No! We're free in this area, now that we are in the in Christ era!" But when it comes to sex, the New Testament reaffirms the creation principle. Matthew 19; 1 Corinthians 6 and reaffirms the condemnation of same-sex behaviour. Not in an obsessive way, as if Paul is set somehow dealing with his own homosexual feelings, or is homophobic. The fact that there's so little reference in the New Testament says something. It doesn't say we should ignore it, but nor does it say that the New Testament is obsessed about this. Any sexual behaviour outside the context of the committed marriage of one man and one woman comes under the general heading of *porneia*. So I think it's simply not the case that Jesus said nothing about the subject when he spoke against sexual immorality. Any Jew at that time would have known the context in which he was writing. He was speaking against sex outside the context of the marriage of one man and one woman. The Levitical text are really affirmed in what Paul does say in Romans 1:26 & 27, which also comes from a creation base. Now, revisionists have a problem with some texts, and a general approach; Bob Fyall & Mark Bonnington in their book 'Homosexuality and the Bible' have spoken of a way of kind-of marginalising, fuzzifying and distancing.

Marginalising: well this is just a maverick, small little aspect of the teaching on the subject; let's look at the big picture. But I'm suggesting the big picture, these individual texts flow from the big picture.

Fuzzifying: It's all so difficult to understand, so we can't make any sense of this.

And Distancing: It belongs to such a distant culture; we can't make any sense of it.

Now the alternative, is not to suggest that there is simplicity here. Of course, we've got to do the hard work, and try to understand, what was the apostle saying, in his context. The context in the book of Romans. The context in the first century.

The context in Romans is one of idolatry. The exchange of the worship of the Creator for the

created. And he moves from that in verse 25, to then verse 26, speaking about same-sex relations: 'the men abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.' And the language of exchange comes twice. Why is this the first sin that's mentioned? It's certainly not the only one, as you'll know that later in the chapter, Paul has a long list of sins that flow from the rejection of the Creator and the worship of the created: including sexual immorality in general, envy, deceit, malice. It's not an obsession with one! Why mention same-sex behaviour first? Not because this is the worst sin. If it was the worst sin, you'd expect it to appear more frequently in the New Testament. I take it because it fits what Paul understands by the exchange. Exchanging the worship of the Creator for the created, is seen in a very obvious form in the exchanging of the natural (the way the Creator created things) for the unnatural. Some would say, 'Well, this isn't the condemnation of all homosexual sex; it must be talking about homosexual sex as it appeared in the Roman world.' Which might have been prostitution, quite possibly in idol temple contexts, pederasty, and so on. Well undoubtedly, both those kinds of homosexual behaviour were going on. If I can respectfully disagree with Paul [Paul Jeffrey] the research would argue, it seems to me, for a much broader understanding of same-sex behaviour. And even within Plato, you've got an understanding of some people who seem to be only really attracted to the same-sex. You don't have the same affirmation of long-term marriages, but you do seem to have a committed loving relationship. It's more complex, but either way, I don't think you could argue clearly one way or the other, what Paul was saying was the norm in the Roman world. But Paul's argument is not about a particular form of same-sex behaviour, but rather saying actually, same-sex sexual behaviour, in and of itself goes against nature. And that language 'against nature' in the context is most naturally understood, as against the way God has made things. Romans 1:18, begins with a reference to creation, creator; that's the language. It's how the words are used in other contexts as well, outside of Paul: 'against the created order'. It's worth noticing too, the fact that there are women included, female sexual behaviour with other women. And the mutuality of the behaviour, 'inflamed with lust for one another', which doesn't suggest simply a kind of idol prostitution, in an idol context, or pederasty, but a genuine and committed lust at least for one another; mutual attraction, let's put it that way. The 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 texts: it's true that there is debate as to how to exactly understand *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. I think an increasingly common understanding; *arsenokoitai* is a completely strange Greek word: 'men who lie with men' and people are trying to work out, 'where did this word come from?'. Well, it's putting in Greek terms; it's a kind-of literal Greek translation of the Hebrew words that you find in the Levitical texts, and it seems that is Paul reaffirming that. There's so much more I could say, but quickly. Let me end with the final argument: Moral; Biblical; Pastoral.

### The Pastoral Argument for Change

Steve Chalke argued for change. In his testimony, there was really very, very little on the Bible. And I have to say I do think the biblical argument for the affirmation of same-sex relationships is very weak. I admire the honesty of Dermot McCulloch. Steve said really very little about the Bible and the little he said I think was unconvincing, even to friends of mine who wanted to be convinced. The power of his argument came from pastoral perspective. He said, "We consign those without the gift or capacitive for celibacy to lives of loneliness, secrecy, fear and even deceit." And I want say we do need to do better pastorally; we do need to hear the pain of those who struggle not just with same-sex attraction, but in all sorts of ways. And, this is not just the same-sex attracted. If we're going to argue for affirming people in other forms of sexual behaviour, or outside of marriage, let's recognise those in marriages where sex has ceased; when one of the couple would long to have a sexual relationship, but it has stopped. Either because of incapacity, or unwillingness. If we're saying that you cannot have a fulfilled life without sex, are we saying that that person then should have the right (because sex has ceased) to leave? Maybe there's profound disability. That's very, very tough. Are we saying sex

is a human right? You can't live as a fulfilled person without sex, so they should leave the marriage and get into a sexual relationship with someone else. Surely not. Are we not saying at that point, the Christian life is tough; the Christian life is tough, and we need to acknowledge that, and help people. And not stigmatise those for whom it's tough, but to make it easy to be honest and say, "I'm finding this really difficult!" And find the support, and openness and love in which that is possible. And I would say the same for those who are same-sex attracted. It's very hard. There is an isolation; I think it's particularly profound in a culture where, even to admit I experience attraction of the same-sex, is to be labelled and perhaps to receive language which is profoundly offensive. Are our churches cultures in which people can say at a young age, 'Actually, this is experience for me.' If not, and if all we are doing is preaching traditional morality, and if we're engaging in the politics in church, and in the country, in strong ways – even if we don't realise it, we can be heard to be saying, "This is a terrible sin! It's the worst sin!" And people could be thinking to themselves, "I'm not going to say anything about that. I couldn't share it here. They wouldn't get it." So what are they going to do? They're going to find affirmation in a culture outside, in the internet or whatever, and then you will find a massive tug-of-war going on emotionally, and psychologically. The fact of traditional Christian morality itself is not the cause, in and of itself, of huge pain. I would say that there is a pain in being in the fallen world, and all of us know the struggle of trying to live out God's standards. That's mighty tough! But it's harder when there's affirmation in the world, but in the church, where you've got a traditional understanding, and lack of sympathy is being expressed. It might not be felt; you might be full of sympathy! But it's not heard, and we need to do better. I would say as I close, I couldn't live this life without the Gospel. And that that's true for all of us. The Christian way is the calling to take up your cross and live for Christ. It does involve sacrifice. It's not unique to those of us who are same-sex attracted. Everyone who is married will know the challenge of saying 'no' to sexual thoughts and behaviour outside of marriage. It's not limited to sex, and for some it's a very heavy burden to bear indeed. But we are saying 'no', in the light of the one who said 'yes' to us; a massive affirmation to us. Male, female, rich, poor, slave, free, gay, straight: a massive affirmation of love and grace. The One who died for us. The One who gave his Spirit to us, to lift our hearts to love him. That what would be unthinkable outside of Christ suddenly becomes something we want to do; we want to live for him! And he places us in Christian communities, which should be, but sadly are not always, places of openness as together: we're broken people, sinful people, messed up people who are able to share struggle, but helping each other in Christ. It's not possible to live without intimacy. It's a lie of the world to say you can only know intimacy in sexual relationships. Intimacy with Christ; intimacy with God's people is a must. And we need to do better to make it a reality.