

RESPONSE OF THE REV. WES DENYER
TO THE PRESENTATION OF THE REV. DR. KEVIN LIVINGSTON
FORUM ON HUMAN SEXUALITY – SATURDAY, JANUARY 30, 2016

When I entered into Knox College at the beginning of the 1980s, I made one of the great friendships of my life with a fellow student. He and I discussed theology, ministry and church into the early hours of the morning. We shared our concerns and anxieties, our hopes and dreams. We talked about our call to ministry. We discussed the power of prayer in our lives, and what the Bible meant to us as we read it together.

We used to laugh and imagine the future, where perhaps as a couple of old retired ministers - fishing rods in hand, bobbing in a boat on a lake somewhere, we'd be swapping old war stories and remembering how we had the privilege of sharing the love of Christ among the people God had called us to serve.

We were both ordained and sent out to churches, distant from one another, but we maintained the friendship. One day he called and asked if he could come and stay with me for a few days. He needed to talk.

After years of private struggle, prayer and counselling, he discovered he could no longer deny his sexual orientation. He was not heterosexual, as he had been trying so hard to live out in his life for almost 40 years, he finally admitted to himself, to his wife, to his family and to his church, that he was a gay man.

He separated from his wife and daughter. His congregation told him, they didn't care about his sexual orientation, they wanted him to stay on as their minister. However, this was the early 90s and an experienced older minister in his presbytery said to him, "For the good of the church, it would be best for you to leave ministry."

He resigned. He became depressed. He had thought ministry was his lifelong calling, but he also knew he had to acknowledge who he really was, and he knew he did not want to be alone. He wanted to share the fullness of his life - emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and physically with another man ... and that, he knew, he could not do as an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament within the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Up until that time, I had believed, spoken and preached what many of us did thirty years ago:

- love the sinner, hate the sin;
- living a gay lifestyle is sinful, but we're all sinners who fall short of the glory of God;
- It's okay to have a homosexual orientation, but you need to remain celibate your whole life;
- It's even possible that homosexuals can be "cured" with aversion therapy – psychological treatment and Christian counselling may be able to help them live a "normal" life.

I no longer believe any of that. Some people are simply not created heterosexual. Through no volitional choice of their own, they are born gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. I believe God loves them just as much as God loves any other person. And I have also come to believe, the God who lives in the fullness and intimacy of the trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - intends for them the fullness of an intimate lifelong relationship of committed love and companionship.

Now as Kevin has proposed in his presentation this morning, he and others believe this is contrary to the will of God - that the expression of our sexuality must be confined to married heterosexual couples - that this is the appropriate understanding of our scriptural witness, the tradition of the church, and, most importantly, it is the will of God.

Let's take a look at these issues ...

The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments - what is their authority and how, in our own day and age, do we understand scripture as the inspired Word of God?

Let me reference two defining statements which we as Presbyterians and as reformed Christians hold to be true:

- From Living Faith, *"The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context."*
- And from our Service of Ordination for ruling and teaching elders, *"And such doctrine as the Church, in obedience to Scripture, and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in the Church's continuing function of reformulating the faith."*

As Presbyterians, we do not believe in scripture as the literal and inerrant Word of God. We believe scripture was inspired by God, but written by human beings who were, just as much as we are, limited by our psychological, sociological, cultural and historical circumstances.

Scripture is the **best** "word" we have in trying to understand the will of God for us, but it is not inerrant, and we should not limit God to the words of scripture.

In other words, is it possible, as we gain knowledge and insight, as our vision of humanity is expanded and as the circumstances of the world change ... that we may be able to see more clearly the nature of the God who called us into existence?

I believe God is the same yesterday, today and forever, but is it possible our ability to understand who God is, and what God requires of us, may change, develop and grow?

For example, in the sixth chapter of the Book of Joshua, after the fall of the city of Jericho, by order of the Lord ... the will of God ... *"they devoted to destruction by the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old."*

I need to tell you, I don't believe God ever commanded the slaughter of babies and old people! However, what I can understand is that people who lived in a time of continual fear and danger of violent death, and where life was "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" – I can believe that their understanding of God's will would be consistent with the nature of their own lives. They could imagine a God who called upon them to kill every man, woman and child ... because that was the kind of world in which they lived.

To say that our understanding of who God was in the darkness of those times, should continue to be the God we worship in 2016, **is to limit God**. We cannot continue to impose those cultural, historical and physical circumstances of the past on our understanding of God today.

So still staying within the Old Testament, we find the same Hebrew people who believed God told them to commit genocide - we find them developing and growing into a new understanding of God.

We read things like ...

- *They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, neither will they learn war any more.*
- *What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*
- *When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. Love him as yourself.*

We learn and we grow, we understand our world and its people in new ways, allowing us to live with greater compassion and justice, with more freedom and opportunities for all. We set God free from our old and limited prejudices, narrow minded thinking, intolerance, racism and hatred.

God doesn't change ... **but we can!**

And of course, as Presbyterians, that is exactly what we've done ... time and time and time again.

Look at our understanding of the role of women ...

The teaching of scripture, and in particular the words of the Apostle Paul, mandate a woman's role to be one of silence in the church, and subordination to men,

- *"the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man" (I Corinthians 11:3);*
- *"Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted to them to speak." (I Corinthians 14:34)*
- *"A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. Women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint." (I Timothy 2)*

Down through the centuries, the church has maintained this to be **absolutely true** and to be properly reflected in the leadership structure of the church.

In the Summa Theologica, St. Aquinas teaches, "*a female is deficient and unintentionally caused.*" (Summa Theologica, 1, qu. 92, art 1, ob. 1)

William Wilberforce has always been one of my heroes in the Christian faith, and yet he disapproves of women anti-slavery activists who organised women's abolitionist groups in the 1820s. Why? ... because, he said, "*for ladies to meet, to publish, to go from house to house stirring up petitions - these appear to me proceedings unsuited to the female character as delineated in Scripture.*"

In 1966, the discussion concerning the role of women in the life and ministry of the church was finally addressed by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. That Assembly was bitterly divided over the issue of the ordination of women. Many spoke up clearly, stating that it was, and always has been, the will of God, the witness of Scripture, and the tradition and practice of the church, that women should not be ordained as elders or ministers.

In fact, the very same argument was made in 1966, which is being made today in opposing the inclusion of LGBT persons – the same argument was made 50 years ago in the debate over the role of women *"making this change will undermine the church's confidence in the inspiration and authority of Scripture."*

We voted to fully include women in the life and ministry of the church. It was the right and faithful decision for us to make, as *"under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church continued in its function of reformulating the faith."*

And that's just one issue of many, where the Bible seems to clearly teach one thing, and the church has eventually chosen to follow a different path - because we've gained new knowledge and insight as the people of God - *because the Holy Spirit continues to reveal new truths* as men and women of faith pray, discuss and study scripture in our effort to hear the authentic voice of God for us today.

What else have we changed ...

For centuries we quoted the words of the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 27:25), when the Jews present at the conviction of Christ cried out, *"Let his blood be on us and our children!"*

Inspired by this Scripture, the great reformer Martin Luther encouraged the church to engage in bitter and violent anti-semitism ... *"What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? We are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming set fire to their synagogues and schools, destroy their houses, take away their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught This is to be done in honour of our Lord, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing and blaspheming of his Son."*

It wasn't until the latter half of the 20th century, after the unimaginable horror of the holocaust, that the church finally came to grips with the depth of its ongoing anti-semitism and its identification of the Jews as "Christ killers."

Or what about slavery? It's in the Bible. The teaching is clear:

- *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling* (Ephesians 6:5)
- *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything* (Colossians 3:22)
- *Slaves be submissive to your masters with all respect* (I Peter 2)

The Presbyterian Church in the United States during the 19th century split and split again over the question of slavery. New presbyteries and Presbyterian denominations were formed as church leaders spoke out for and against slavery. It was a bitterly divided church ... over a matter that seems so clear to us now: **It is not and never has been the will of God that one person should "own" another person.**

Or what about our treatment of Canada's aboriginal people?

In 1857, we read scripture, the last chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, *"Go therefore and **make** disciples of all nations."* So we encouraged the government to create and adopt a new piece of legislation called *"the Gradual Civilization Act."* It was passed in Upper Canada. It defined aboriginal culture as inferior, stripped native people of citizenship and subordinated them in a separate legal

category from non-Indians. Then we used it as an excuse to establish Residential Schools with the goal of "*converting any surviving native people to Christianity.*"

We thought we were doing the right thing!

Residential schools were created in 1890 and lasted until 1984.

And *God forgive us* ... in order to permit the churches to take the children from their parents, the federal government passed a law, which legally allowed the RCMP to enter into Aboriginal Reservations and *take the children.*

The Presbyterian Church in Canada volunteered to participate in the noble project of *forcing these savages to come to Christ!* **We believed** we were doing God's will and fulfilling the mandate of scripture!

So, from that time, right through until 1969, we assisted in depriving our aboriginal children of their culture and their language. We tore families apart. There were cases of physical abuse and forms of discipline which should have never been used against children.

In 1994 The Presbyterian Church in Canada confessed its role in the tragic legacy of these residential schools. What we had so firmly believed and participated in for almost one hundred years, we declared to have been incompatible with the will of God.

Here's what I'm wondering ... is it possible we have grown and matured, and in our time, we are invited to change our attitude toward LGBT persons and offer to them full inclusion in the life and ministry of the church?

Now, I'd like to take a few moments to consider some of the specific points Kevin made in his presentation, and make a few comments.

- *"We are all sinners, and more to the point, sexual sinners. All of us have fallen short of God's perfect ideal ... sexual sins are not the only sins, and not necessarily the most sinful - pride and hypocrisy are surely worse in the eyes of God."*

If it were true that it's a sin for a gay or lesbian person to live in a lifelong, committed and loving sexual relationship, and that we are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God, why is it that we stigmatize and condemn their particular sin as **so bad** that we must restrict the possible offices which they can hold within the leadership of the church, and yet our own sinfulness, sexual or otherwise, does not disqualify us? How are we making that judgement? And isn't it peculiar, that we excuse ourselves, *and vilify the other.*

As well, we are admonished to "*love the sinner, but hate the sin*" ... and yet that becomes a little difficult for LGBT persons to hear when the scripture we are defending as inspired by God, doesn't sound nearly so friendly. The Book of Leviticus says, "*If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.*" And in Romans it says, in reference to homosexuality, "*those who practise such things deserve to die.*"

And the problem goes deeper still, because I fully agree with Kevin when he says, "*Our sexuality is basic to our humanness*" and "*to talk about sex is to touch a point close to the centre of our personality.*"

So when we consider how central one's sexuality is to one's human identity, and then become defensive around Scripture that connects a person's sexual expression with the need for punishment by death or "deserving of death," – "*love the sinner, but hate the sin*" is perhaps a distinction too fine for most LGBT persons to fully believe in or trust.

And I must say, I also agree with Kevin when he says, "*We are never more vulnerable than when we lie in bed with another — it's time to take off the masks and disclose who we really are - our thoughts, our feelings, our bodies.*" Kevin goes on to say, "*I have no doubt that many homosexual relationships are marked by deep love and care.*"

I know that's true ... and it is precisely for that reason, I believe the God who lives in the fullness and intimacy of the trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — intends for LGBT persons, the fullness of an intimate lifelong relationship of committed love and companionship.

I cannot imagine forever denying them the fullness and joy of such a life-giving relationship.

Now, we could go on to quote our favourite Biblical scholars - to say,

- **"My scholars are better than your scholars!"**
- **"My scholars are right and your scholars are wrong!"**

All those debates:

- How reliably can we apply passages from the Old Testament to life in a post resurrection world?
- Did Paul know there were people who had a same gender sexual orientation?
- As a first century Jew could Paul even imagine such a thing as a loving and committed same sex relationship, or did he only know of it as a pagan practice associated with the worship of foreign gods?
- Are there some categories of Scripture that are culturally conditioned, while others embody eternal truth?
- What is the significance of the fact that Jesus said **nothing** about this issue?

Oh, we can argue about those things for a long time, and still not come one inch closer to figuring it all out ... **my scholars ... your scholars!**

It could be, it comes down to a decision we make, as the Apostle Paul says, "*to work out own salvation with fear and trembling*" —that it's a decision each one of us will have to make in prayer and in conversation - in love and in faith.

You know the kind of question I ask myself... the question most central to me ...

- It's not, will this decision make the church more or less successful?
- Will we lose members?
- It's not, am I compromising with the world?

- It's not, will we be out of step with Christians of other denominations and cultures?

My question is deeper and more fundamental than any of these practical considerations. My question is "**What kind of God, *is God?***"

If there's really such a thing as Christianity, and if I've really been praying to God all these years and not to an empty universe, and if the church really is the expression of Christ in the world - then I trust God will lead us in and through a confusing and difficult issue, in the midst of a confusing and difficult age.

- **What is the character of the God in whom we believe?**
- **What is the nature of the God whom we worship and serve?**

I trust in a God who is loving and gracious and kind; who is with us most profoundly in our doubts and uncertainties and questions. A God who will never, ever let us go, and who loves each one of us as if there were only one to love.

Ultimately, my response to the presentation of Kevin, my brother in Christ, is let's continue to pray together, worship together and read scripture together ... and let's continue to talk with one another, and perhaps sometimes to argue, while fundamentally trusting, God will lead us into a new tomorrow we cannot even begin to understand or imagine.

God is bigger and more mysterious than the human mind can understand, and I trust God enough to place the future in those divine hands...