

The Limits of Fellowship

1. The Misguided Title

Let me commence by saying that the title “the Limits of Fellowship” is misguided. I know I chose it myself, but it is the wrong question. It starts us off looking for the negative when the theme of the Bible is the positive.

In as much as we are able we are to live at peace with all people. We are pray for our enemies, seek their welfare, not answer evil for evil, and never take revenge (Romans 12:14-21). We are to love one another and by quiet honest work not be trouble makers to others but live properly before outsiders (1 Thessalonians 4:9-11).

And when people come to us in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we are to welcome them. Our welcome is not for the sake of disputes. We are not to be judgemental. Nor are we to exercise our freedom in Christ to harm the weak whose conscience is bound. Rather we are to serve and build one another in love (Romans 14-15).

We are to avoid quarrelling about words or foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels about the law for they are unprofitable and worthless (2 Timothy 2:14, Titus 3:9). The youthful passions that we are to flee are contrasted with righteousness, faith, love and peace. For we are to “have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” (2 Timothy 2:22-26)

This is our concern: the salvation of other people. For the sake of winning people to the Lord we are to set aside our own preferences and become like other people (1 Corinthians 9:19-23, 10:31-11:1). So we do not want to destroy them by our legalism nor by our liberty. When we see somebody fall into sin our concern is their repentance restoration and salvation. We go to them gently looking to ourselves lest we too be tempted (Galatians 6:1-5) and wherever possible we seek to restore the brother or sister. We are to “have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.” (Jude 22-23) Even the extreme judgement delivered to the sinner in 1 Corinthians 5 is “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

Within congregational life the love that we have for one another is the hallmark of being a disciple of Jesus (John 13:35). The first letter of John is full of encouragement and assurance of the difference that the gospel makes in our love of one another. We call each other brothers because of our common rebirth. But such a name must be matched in our behaviour towards each other (1 John 4). Our treatment of each other as brothers should mean that we would prefer to be defrauded than to take our disputes with each other into the public domain of the courts.

Maintaining the unity that Christ has won for us by his death and resurrection is commanded of us. “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:1-6)

The desire to exclude people from the Church was championed by Diotrephes. We read of him in 3 John –

“I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good.” (3 John 1:9-11)

There is little in the New Testament to encourage Christians to split or divide. In fact we are warned against the divisive person. The works of the flesh include “rivalries, dissensions, divisions,” (Galatians 5:20). So in the context of foolish controversies dissensions and quarrels God says: “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” (Titus 3.10-11).

a) The Paradox

But this treatment of the divisive person raises a paradox for us. For we are to divide from the divisive person.

It is not a paradox that is difficult to resolve for the error is not in division but in being divisive. It is the person who makes for division, loves division and causes division that is in the wrong. Dividing ourselves from them is the right thing to do. Division is not itself wrong but there is a spirit of divisiveness which is wrong. Yet this paradox highlights the problem that we have in dealing with our differences.

The Christian’s permanent disposition is, and should always be, to build for harmony with all people especially with the people of God. Yet there comes time when we must stand out as different and in opposition to the world even with those who claim to be the people of God.

b) With Whom Do We Divide?

So with whom do we divide? When? Under what circumstances? For what purpose?

One of the most important issues to understand is the difference in our relationship with Christians and with non-Christians.

(i) **Non Christians**

As the Holy People of God of course we are to be different to the world. (Ephesians 4:17-24, Colossians 3:5-17, 1 Peter 4:1-5) Indeed we must expect the world to dislike, hate and even persecute us as our Lord taught his disciples (John 15:18-20, 1 John 3:13).

We are not to expect that the world we live in is going to be so improved that we will easily live in peace and harmony with our neighbours. The parable of the wheat and weeds in Matthew 13:36-43 shows us what the world is like and will be like till the harvest comes. Now is not the time to separate the weeds of the world from the wheat that is also growing there. There is a fundamental and eternal difference between those in the kingdom of God and those who are outside. The days in which we live, are the last days when peoples' opposition to God will be great. They will not put up with sound doctrine but will gather teachers who will satisfy their own passions (2 Timothy 3:1-4 and 4:3-4).

Sometimes we have to avoid such people. So Paul's advice to Timothy concerning Alexander the coppersmith is he "did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message." (2 Timothy 4:14-15). We do not know about this man. We do not know if he was professing to be a Christian when he did this harm to the apostle, or what the nature of harm was. But it appears to be a non-Christian that Timothy was to avoid. There is no encouragement for Christians to seek martyrdom in the New Testament so it should not be surprising that we should flee from the persecutors.

But that is not the same as avoiding the immoral. Paul apparently was misunderstood in his advice to the Corinthians. For he writes in 1 Corinthians 5: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler- not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:9 – 13).

Here is the clear distinction between our relationships with non-Christians and Christians. There should be a withdrawal of association with those who profess Christ but are living in sexual immorality as there would not be for those who make no such profession.

Thus with non-Christians except for the danger of some opponents there really is no reason to withdraw from association. We may have nothing in common and we will be divided from them by our lifestyle choices but we have no reason to withdraw from them and every reason to stay in friendship that we may share the saving message of the Cross with them.

(ii) Christians

But with Christians or those who profess themselves to be Christians – things are very different. There can be, and in 1 Corinthians 5 should be, some withdrawal from certain people because of their behaviour.

This involves us inevitably in making judgement decisions about people and behaviours. We are fairly fallible in making such judgements. We need to weigh the evidence very carefully and not jump to conclusions. But none-the-less we have to make the judgements. And as the scriptures say of the Messiah we are not to “judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he will judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;” (Isaiah 11:3-4). So, we must judge without respect of persons but by the revealed will of God.

Our judgements will never be fully accurate or final judgements¹. We do not know enough, especially of the intention of the hearts, to make accurate or final judgements. So Paul would write: “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged (ἀνακρινῶ) by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” (1 Corinthians 4:3-5). Yet Paul himself would in the very next chapter make judgements about others and call upon the church to do the same: “For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment (κρινῶ) on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 5:3-5). And in the next chapter he rebukes the church for having members turn to outsiders for judgement on disputes between them: “When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge (κρινῶ) the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers?” (1 Corinthians 6:1-5).

Thus we need to follow the Lord Jesus instructions in Matthew 7 of judging as we wish to be judged – not taking the speck out of our brother’s eye while we have a log in our own – but doing to others as we would have them do unto us.

¹ Though through the gospel ministry the human declaration of the forgiveness of God has eternal consequences. (John 20:23)

c) Judgements

This will still involve making judgements – even negative ones – for we have to watch out for false prophets and to discern the difference between the narrow and wide gates. And the false prophets come purposely in deceptive appearance in order to lead astray God's people. They are a real danger – described as “ravenous wolves”. Their goal is to lead astray the elect. This is not possible because God protects the elect by shortening the days of tribulation and by warning beforehand of the dangers of false prophets (Mark 13:20-22).

Judging then as the Messiah would judge means that we are no respecter of people. Our concern is with the truth. Thus we are not to accept or dismiss people on false basis.

We are not to accept or dismiss people because we “like” them. We are to love one another because we are Christian, not because we are lovable. Rather we are to bear with one another and forgive one another because in Christ we are to love one another (Colossians 3:12-15, Ephesians 2:2). It is this reality of loving one another that is the hallmark of being a one of Jesus' people (John 13:35).

Furthermore our love and acceptance of one another is not based on race, sex, class or religious background. This is the great argument of Ephesians 2-3 but also the climax of the argument in Galatians 3. “For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:27-29) Which is why we are to welcome all who come in the name of Christ without passing judgements or quarrel over opinions (Romans 14).

Nor should our judgements be based on institutional authorisation. Paul was unimpressed by the status of the Jerusalem leadership. “And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) — those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.” (Galatians 2:6). Indeed the officialdom of Israel was exactly the group who roused the crowd that called out “Crucify!” (Mark 15:1-15, John 19:6, 15).

Earlier in Mark's gospel an interesting episode records Jesus warning against judging by institutional authorisation. The event is Mark 9 where the disciples tried to stop an unnamed exorcist who was driving out spirits in the name of Jesus. Their objection to the man's ministry was that “he was not following us” (Mark 9:38). Though he was not one of the authorised disciples, he was effectively doing the ministry that they ironically were unable to do earlier in the same chapter. Jesus said: “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us.” (Mark 9:39-40).

While we are to follow the example and teaching of our leaders, submitting to them in love (1 Corinthians 16:16, Hebrews 13:7, 17), Jesus warned against too much authority being given to leaders. “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who

is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:8-12)

We are not to place ourselves under our leaders as mediators between God and us. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). And while there is corporate sin and corporate responsibility yet “each one of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12). It is not only Adam or humanity that will be judged or the Church that will be saved, each one of us is personally answerable to God. Being a teacher does not place anyone above judgement but rather brings them into stricter judgement (James 3:1).

2. Whom To Avoid?

So we return to our question of whom we should avoid or withdraw from? Why or when should we do it? How should we do it?

From 1 Corinthians 5 it is clearly those within Christianity not those outside². But which ones and why?

There are three aspects of concern to consider: fellowship, teaching, and behaviour.

a) Fellowship

Firstly then the issue of Fellowship. For the people of God were not to fellowship with everybody. Indeed one of the characteristics of the nation Israel was its requirements of holiness that were to keep it separate from other peoples. They were to take no part in the religious expressions of other nations; they were not to intermarry with them or to adopt their practices morality or laws. They were to completely destroy and dispossess those who were already in the promised land – partly as a judgement of God on their sins and partly that the people and land of God were to be completely holy.

Yet within the New Testament there is a universality and inclusion that strikes a quite different note to the exclusiveness of Israel. A different note but not one that dispenses with holiness or any separation. Indeed God’s judgement on Israel’s flirtations with idolatry and sinfulness is given to Christians as the example of what happens to the people of God when they compromise on holiness (1 Corinthians 10:1-10).

The command to separate oneself from idolatry is fairly clear: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel:

² There are exceptions that have been discussed above such as the non-Christians we are to withdraw from are the dangerous (2 Timothy 4:14) and those who encourage us to join them in their sinful behaviour (1 Peter 4:3-5, 1 Corinthians 15:33-34).

are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (1 Corinthians 10:14-22).

Eating and drinking together are expressions of fellowship – of sharing things in common. We cannot eat at the table of demons and of Christ – for we cannot share with both. There is a point at which one must decline to come to the table, for it is a hypocritical nonsense to think that we can be in fellowship with both simultaneously. There has to be renunciation and repentance before one can move from one table to another.

Total inclusiveness of a tolerant relativism is completely at odds with Christianity. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions that show the impossibility of unequal yoking (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1).

In the Old Testament this is illustrated by the strange life of Daniel. He had to draw the line of separation when in Babylon. He drew it on the issue of eating at the king's table, at the falling down to worship the golden image, at the practice of praying toward the temple for the redemption of Israel. These were non-negotiable. Rather face death than sin.

In the New Testament the disciples would not retreat from preaching Christ even though forbidden it by lawful authority (Acts 4:18-20). If this caused division within the community it may be sad but it was what Jesus did and expected his disciples to do (Matthew 10:16-25, 34-39).

But what about fellowship with Christians? Paul tells us that divisions amongst us are inevitable so "that those who are genuine amongst you may be recognised" (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Sometimes Christian disagreement is not about recognising the genuine but simply choosing to go separate paths, while still being in good standing with each other. So Paul and Barnabas' disagreement over Mark (Acts 16:36-41) or the couple of Christians who cannot live with each other and so choose to live apart (1 Corinthians 7:10). They continue to be married to each other and are not free to marry anybody else, but will live out their obedience to Christ separately.

Sometimes the separation has to do with church discipline for the benefit of the wilful. So Paul calls upon us not to have anything to do with the lazy who will not work – "not to regard him as an enemy but warn him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15).

However when we offer help to strangers who come in the name of Christ to preach his gospel (3 John 5-8) then we are "fellow workers for the truth". So we are not to offer any hospitality to those who go out preaching a false gospel for "whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works" (2 John 11).

So the scriptures urge, warn and command us to avoid certain people and fellowship. We are to have nothing to do with them. We must not help or give succour to them in their work. We are not to fellowship with them in eating and drinking. This is not a matter of personal preference or choice but of obedience to God's word. He commands us not to fellowship with them.

In particular there are two groups that we are to avoid, false teachers and immoral "Christians".

b) False Teachers

On the issue of false teachers there are five aspects to consider

- (i) the importance of teaching**
- (ii) the consequence of the teaching**
- (iii) the authority of the teacher**
- (iv) the tolerance of false opinions**
- (v) the separation from false teachers**

(i) Firstly we must note **the importance of teaching**. Christianity comes from the word of God. It is taught to us – in words – the words of the Gospel. That is the form in which the salvation of God is mediated to us. The words are about actions that God has taken in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The words, if they were not about reality, would not be true and would not be saving. But the reality of Jesus death and resurrection is conveyed to us in his word taught in human speech (Luke 24:44-49). Being God's word it is powerful and dynamic, but yet extraordinary as it may seem, it is conveyed in human speech (Romans 1:16-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

This makes Christianity very susceptible to the problem of false prophets and false teaching. When people come claiming to speak the word of God or to give the true meaning of God's word we have to pay very great attention lest we be hard hearted and rejected God's word or lest we be deceived by false teaching.

From the beginning the Devil has been a murderer, a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). By the means of false teaching he brought death into the world when he denied what God had said and reinterpreted what God meant saying: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:4-5).

Throughout the history of Israel in the Old Testament there has been conflict between the true prophets of God speaking his word, and the false prophets seeking to distort and deny it.

In the New Testament the struggle continued. Establishing the truth and teaching it while rejecting falsehood, exposing and rebuking it was and is a normal part of Christian living.

The Christian gospel is not an infinitely malleable set of ideas, relationships or practices. In the opening chapter of the letter to the Galatians Paul exhibits his understanding of the logical status of the gospel message. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:6-9).

From this passage we can see that: there is only one Gospel; that it can be distorted; it can be contradicted; that it is true independent of its preacher and that those who falsify it deserve to be damned.³

Consequently it is very important that ministers of the gospel rightly handle the word of truth and that false teachers are rebuked and silenced. This is the import of the instruction of Paul to his protégés and colleagues Timothy and Titus (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7; 4:1, 6-7, 13; 2 Timothy 2:2, 14-18; 4:1-5; Titus 1:10-11, 13-14, 2:1, 15). It is also his instruction to elders (Acts 20:26-32) as being ‘an apt teacher’ is a prerequisite for their appointment (Tit 1:5-9 and 1 Tim 3:1-7). It is critical that an elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9). The character of the ministry of the gospel is handing over the good deposit, the words and the pattern of sound words that have been taught. So faithfulness is a key prerequisite of the job (2 Timothy 1:13, 2:2) as Paul was faithful to the deposit he received (1 Corinthians 15:3).

(ii) Secondly we must note **the consequences of the teaching**. For the word of God is not only the great creative redemptive power for good but its perversion the very work of Satan for death and destruction.

By God’s word the heavens and earth were created (Psalm 33:6, John 1:3). For the Word of God is and always has been with God and is God (John 1:1-2). So when we are dealing with the words of God we are dealing with God himself (Hebrews 4:12-13). The scriptures are breathed out by God so that what the scripture says – God says.⁴ This means that the word of God is living and active piercing the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart and at work in believers (Hebrews 4:12-13 Thessalonians 2:13).

Thus the teaching of God’s word is not merely a communication of information, but effectively the pastorally transforming work of God – bringing people to faith in God and

³ ἀναθεμα ESV, AV “accursed” NIV “eternally condemned”. TDNT “Handing over to God’s judicial wrath”

⁴ Nb. e.g. the ascription of authorship of Psalm 95 to God, the Holy Spirit and David in Hebrews 3-4.

transforming people as their minds are renewed to know the mind of God (Romans 10:17, 12:1-2). As Peter said to Jesus: “You have the words of eternal life,” (John 6:68).

But Peter later wrote of dangerous consequences of false teachers and false prophets. He knew the importance of reminding Christians of the truth that they had embraced. He knew that this was not based in myths but in his eyewitness experience that accorded with the words of the divinely inspired prophets (2 Peter 1:12-21). So he wrote warning of false prophets and false teachers who would bring in secretly destructive heresies and bringing swift destruction on themselves (2 Peter 2:1). But notice that their damaging work is not confined to themselves alone. “And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words” (2 Peter 2:2-3). Peter understood that unstable people twist the scriptures “to their own destruction”. He warned us “You therefore beloved, knowing this beforehand take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability” (2 Peter 3:16-17).

The dangerous consequences of false teaching affect both the hearer and the society, in this life and the next. Paul warned Timothy “avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.” (2 Timothy 2:16-18). It is why our Lord warned us against false prophets and false shepherds (Matthew 7:15, 24:11-12, 24:24) and reserves some of his most stringent criticism to the religious leaders and teachers of his day. The seven woes he declaims in Matthew 23 is one of the most powerful rejections and warnings about religious leaders in the scriptures. The dreadful consequences of those who follow their duly appointed but false leaders he describes as becoming a “child of hell”. These false scribes and Pharisees⁵ “shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”

The human capacity to be deceived is great for our hearts are sinful and deceptive (Jeremiah 17:9). Unstable people are easy pray for false teachers (2 Timothy 3:6-7) but we all need to be repeatedly warned not to be deceived (1 Corinthians 6:9, 12:1-2, 15:33, Galatians 5:21, 6:7 Ephesians 5:6, Colossians 2:8, James 1:16, 1 John 3:7). Indeed we need even to be warned against ourselves for being deceived one can deceive others – as Paul describes our present age “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” (2 Timothy 3:12-13).

(iii) Thirdly we need to understand **the authority of the teacher**. For though through books and articles, we encounter teaching separated from teachers, in fact teaching does not exist without teachers. And in the church teachers have the authority of leadership. We do not just submit to teaching but to people (1 Corinthians 16:16, Hebrews 13:17) as

⁵ I am not at this point arguing that anybody today is teaching what the Scribes and Pharisees taught but that false teaching is not something that Christians can ignore as harmless when our Lord was so critical of the false teachers of his day because of, amongst other things, the harm they caused to other people.

we obey their instructions and imitate their faith (1 Corinthians 4:16-17, 11:1 Philippians 3:17, 4:9 2 Thessalonians 3:9).

The link between teaching and authority can be seen in 1 Timothy 2:12 but also in the pre-requisite of bishops/elders in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9. It was the task of the Apostles (Matthew 28:20). It is the task of both Timothy and Titus (1 Timothy 3:6, 11-16, Titus 2:1, 15). It is the role of the leader in Hebrews 13:7, 17.

This is why the elders who labour in teaching are considered worthy of double honour (1 Timothy 5:17). It is also why the teacher is to be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1). For the tongue is very powerful in its effects and can cause great damage. It is also why the elders who are appointed to teach within the Church, must have stable and godly lives and why Timothy must devote himself to both life and doctrine (1 Timothy 4:15-16). For a teacher's obedience to the teaching is essential if he is to care for the church of God (1 Timothy 3:1-7) as well as to avoid the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-2).

(iv) Fourthly we need to note the **tolerance of false opinions** in the New Testament. Though the teacher is to be judged with greater strictness he does not have to be perfect before teaching. There is acceptable latitude of opinion between Christians and there are matters of indifference that teachers should not enter into.

Timothy is to let people see his progress in his life and doctrine. The teacher must hold firmly to what the apostle has taught. But he does not need to know everything. Rather he is to grow in his knowledge and understanding of God. This is the model he needs to set for the congregation (1 Timothy 4:11-16).

Between Christians there will be many different opinions. Even over issues of religious observances. The arguments on Christian liberty in 1 Corinthians 8-11 and Romans 14 are all premised on the possibility of Christians having different opinions on certain matters. Food laws, seasonal observations, or drinking wine are not matters central to the kingdom of God and so different attitudes of people's consciences should be allowed for. Otherwise there will be the reconstruction of justification by good works and the undermining of the centrality of justification by faith in the gracious death of our Lord and Saviour.

It is at this point that many attempts at working out with whom we can fellowship go off the rails. For people naturally want a list of the central matters over which we cannot be tolerant and a list of the peripheral matters over which we can exercise some latitude. But there is no possibility of such a list. For even a matter that is of no consequence in itself - like the food we eat or being circumcised - can in some circumstances be central to gospel fellowship. So in Galatians we are told that "neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Galatians 6:15). Thus Paul refused to submit to the false brothers who would insist on Titus being circumcised. For in the enforced circumcision of Titus he saw that "the truth of the gospel" would be compromised (Galatians 2:3-5). This concern for the truth of the Gospel also lay behind Paul's rebuke of Peter and Barnabas over food laws. For when they refused to fellowship with Gentile Christians for fear of the circumcision party - they were undermining the Gentiles'

standing in Christ by faith alone (Galatians 2:11-14). It was a gospel matter even though it was about food and the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating a drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

There is no possibility of making the list of matters called *adiaphora*⁶. For anything can be used to express the truth or to teach falsehood. Though there are matters that are less germane to the gospel. Over these Christians can disagree – it is even good that Christians do disagree – for it clarifies our justification is in Christ's death.

Furthermore there are some areas of truth that the Christian teacher should leave alone completely. So Paul tells Timothy, "Remind them of these things (great truths about dying and enduring with Christ) and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers... avoid irreverent babble" (2 Timothy 2:14-16 cf 1 Timothy 6:3-5) and 1 Timothy concludes, "O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called 'knowledge,' for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you." (1 Timothy 6:20-21). He also warns Titus: "avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless" (Titus 3:9).

(v) Fifthly we must note **the separation from false teachers** that the Scriptures enjoin upon us. This issue is central to our place in history today.

Paul wrote to the Romans: "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; **avoid them**. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil." (Romans 16:17-19).

Again Paul teaches about separation from false teachers when he wrote to Timothy concerning teachers such as Hymenaeus and Philetus "who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened". We must not be afraid that God's plans will be thwarted for God know what he is sovereignly doing. He knows who are his. He uses all kinds of instruments to bring about his purpose. But, though false teachers will in time fail like Jannes and Jambres did, yet we are to "avoid such people" (2 Timothy 3:5).

John also teaches the necessity to remove yourself from support of false teaching. He wrote

"For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes

⁶ Things that are indifferent.

to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.” (2 John 7-11)

This teaching of John is consistent with his instructions in his third epistle. For there he makes it clear that by helping strangers who go out in the name of Jesus we are “fellow workers for the truth”.⁷

We cannot be rewarded as fellow workers in the truth when we support missionaries, without being criticised and judged for being fellow workers in wickedness if we give similar comfort to false teachers in their ministry.

This hospitality and greeting of teachers is the flip side of Jesus’ promise that whoever gives so much as a glass of cold water to a messenger because he comes in the name of Christ will not miss out on his reward (Matthew 10:42). For in helping the little ones of Jesus when they are naked, hungry and thirsty you are helping Christ himself (Matthew 25:31-46). It is also indicative of the nature of Jesus teaching on how to treat the repeatedly warned and unrepentant sinner “...let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:17).

So when the risen Christ addressed the church of the Ephesians he commended them for their hatred of the work of the Nicolaitans as he held against the church of Pergamum that “you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” (Revelation 2:6, 15). But he is really condemnatory of the church in Thyatara because of their tolerance of false teaching and the false teacher: “But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead” (Revelation 2:20-23).

c) Immoral “Christians”

The case of Thyatira brings us to another aspect of withdrawal of fellowship. For false teaching is one reason for withdrawal but immorality is another. Of course when the two go together, as they often/usually do, then the reasons for withdrawal are overwhelming.

(i) We All Sin

On the issue of moral behaviour, we know that we all sin - and sin in many different ways. The person who says that they have no sin or have not sinned is a liar and makes

⁷ “Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.” 3 John 5-8

God a liar. Rather we are to walk in the light of fellowship with God and his people by confessing our sins, knowing that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:5-10).

Furthermore when we see our brother sin we are to seek to restore him gently (Galatians 6:1-5) and to pray for his forgiveness (1 John 5:16-17). Such prayer is not about “sin that leads to death”. There is sin that leads to death and other sin that does not lead to death. That is, while any lawbreaking makes us accountable to the whole law (James 2:10) yet there is a differentiation between sins in the law. There is sinning accidentally⁸ (ignorance) and, defiantly⁹. There is gnat law and camel law. There are weightier matters of the law like justice and mercy and faithfulness and righteousness as well as lesser concerns like tithing mint dill and cumin (Matthew 12:7, 23:23-24). There are applications of the law that have become obsolete in the history of salvation (Hebrews 8:13) and others whose application requires us to understand their spiritual intent from the perspective of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:8-11, 10:6-11).

Thus not every sin committed by a Christian means that we withdraw from fellowship. Otherwise we would be conducting church in the proverbial telephone box and even then we too would have to leave it because of our sin. Rather the issue is how we deal with sin in our lives and the seriousness of the sin.

(ii) If We Repent

For if we repent, God is always merciful and gracious and will forgive us our sins. As John wrote: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. . . . My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 1:8-9, 2:1).

It is the refusal to repent that turns any trespass into “sinning defiantly” or “sinning with a high hand”. For this, there can be no forgiveness, not because of the sin itself but because of the way in which the work of the Holy Spirit is resisted and despised (Numbers 15:30-31, 2 Chronicles 36:16, Matthew 12:31-32). There comes a point where the opportunity of repentance is no longer available (Hebrews 6:4-6 12:17).

Of course repentance must be real and not just to avoid punishment or to fulfil appearances (Matthew 3:7-10). Saying or even feeling sorry is not the same as repentance (2 Corinthians 7:5-13). While repentance can comfort other Christians it is only when that repentance is real. Paul did not want the Corinthians to apologise to him to make him feel better but to repent of their actions. It was their repentance toward God that

⁸ Numbers 15:27 בְּשִׁגְגָה ESV, NIV “Unintentionally”. AV “through ignorance”. The sins of ignorance concept can be seen in Leviticus 5:14ff, 1 Timothy 1:13, Hebrews 5:2, 9:7.

⁹ Numbers 15:30 בְּיָד רְבִיבָהּ ESV, AV. “a high hand”. NIV “defiantly”.

made him feel better. Saying sorry for hurting somebody is not repenting – it is not even acknowledging wrongdoing let alone changing the course of life.

Jesus gives a clear process for dealing with a disciple who sins against his brother without repentance. After being warned by the offended party and warned a second time by the offended party plus one or two witnesses, the matter is to be brought before the church. It is only when he refuses to listen to the church that the offended party takes the action of separating himself.

Being unrepentant is one of the critical failures that breaches fellowship.

(iii) The Seriousness of Sin

While repentance is one such issue, the seriousness of some sins is another.

As argued above while all sin is serious not all sins are equally serious. The sins that affect fellowship are those that are public denials of key gospel standards. The sins that bring dishonour to the name of Jesus, undermine the holiness of the congregation and should cause offence to the people of God are those that are intolerable.

While the church is not pure or Christians sinless, there are major breaches of public community morality that are intolerable. This is not to minimise the importance of any sin. It is just that not all sins have the same seriousness of consequence. There are those sins that do not lead to death. There are the sins that we bear with one another in forgiveness.

Take for example the economic sins in the New Testament.

The Thessalonians are warned against laziness. They are told to withhold food from the lazy man who will not work, and when he does not obey the command to earn his own keep then the congregation is to “have nothing to do with him”. However this is not a final outcome but another strategy to get him to take his responsibilities seriously for Paul continues: “have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” (2 Thessalonians 3:12-15).

The words of James to the rich are much stronger. Though there is no action enjoined upon the church. But the sins of the rich in their unjust cruelty to the poor should lead the rich to “weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.” (James 5:1).

So not all sins are treated in the same way. But some are considered intolerable and therefore treated with great seriousness and direct action. For example Paul rebukes the Corinthians on many matters but it is a particular issue of sexual immorality that requires immediate and drastic action. “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). This breach of standards

lowers the congregation beneath the morality of outsiders. It cannot be tolerated in any shape or form.

In the next chapter he warns the Corinthians: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Here is an important passage because it makes clear the exclusion from the kingdom of God. It illustrates the general reason for exclusion (“the unrighteous”) with some specific and concrete examples (“sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers”). It allows for the possibility of salvation for the guilty if there is a significant change (washed, sanctified, and justified). And it warns of the deception that comes with these sins. (“Do not be deceived”¹⁰).

Both 2 Peter and Jude discuss people¹¹ who “secretly” bring false teaching and immorality into the church. They both deny the Lord, and encourage sexual immorality amongst Christians. While both epistles warn of these people and encourage the Christians to “contend for the faith” (Jude 4) neither encourage the Christians to exclude these divisive people from the congregation. Rather the Christians are encouraged to remember that God will bring judgement as he did in the flood or in Sodom and Gomorrah and that God can be trusted by the faithful to judge the wicked and save the righteous.

(iv) The Call for Action

The risen Jesus’ letter to the seven churches calls for direct action against such false prophets. But the church at Pergamum tolerated the Nicolaitans as well as those who taught as Balaam leading to sexual immorality and idolatry. To them comes the call to repent and the warning of judgement for these failings.

But much harsher is the word to the church of Thyatira: “But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.” (Revelation 2:20-23).

Toleration is sometimes inexcusable. This woman is teaching falsely this common combination of idolatry and sexual immorality. The church should have acted against her,

¹⁰ Interestingly a similar warning is given in two parallel passages Galatians 5:21 and Ephesians 5:6.

¹¹ “False prophets” in 2 Peter 2.

not tolerated her. The Lord of the Church may patiently bear with the sin of the world, but was not going to tolerate her continued sinful teaching and practice.

So there are some people who profess to be Christians we should avoid, because of their behaviour. Such people are mentioned in 2 Timothy 3, where in the climax of the description of evil times we read of people who are “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” These are not irreligious people these are people of professed godliness. But their lives and teaching deny the power of what they profess. And Paul’s command to Timothy is “avoid such people” (2 Timothy 3:4-5).

3. Come To Lambeth

So with this canvassing of the Biblical material we come to Lambeth. Or at least we come to the invitation that our Bishops have declined. Are they right or wrong? Should others decline as well or is just a private decision that reflects personal wishes?

I am not going to rehearse the problems in the Anglican communion. Mark Thompson has just done that for us. Nor am I going to explain the nature of the Lambeth Conference, as Robert Tong has just done that for us.

However there are some matters that I need to mention to see how this Biblical material should be applied to this particular question.

a) The Incarnation of Ideas Creates Division

The incarnation of ideas creates division amongst people. As long as we are discussing an idea we can stay at the same table. Once you start teaching the idea we may have to withdraw from each other. Once one of us incarnates that idea into an action we are no longer able to continue with each other.

Take a neutral issue like infant baptism. As long as we are just talking there is no reason to separate from those who believe babies should or should not be baptised. But once somebody starts teaching it as a matter of right and wrong then those of us who disagree cannot remain in fellowship. But nothing divides us more certainly than when somebody either baptises a baby or refuses to baptise a baby or rebaptises an adult. Then when the teaching has been incarnated there is no room left for difference of opinion. At that point not only are we distanced from the person but even more from the minister and church who acted in this fashion.

Similarly notice the divisive consequences of ordaining or refusing to ordain women as priests or bishops. As long as we are just talking about it then we can continue in relationship. Once people start preaching on the matter, divisions start to emerge. But if it is your belief that we must ordain women in order to fulfil the command of God then you cannot keep talking about it, you have to do something. And once you act upon your belief then those who are by conscience opposed to this action must either deny their conscience or separate from you. So within the Anglican church there are the created no-

go zones of ministry – where some places women are accepted as priests and in other places the same women are considered to be deacons or even lay.

I am not talking about the right or wrong of this illustration just the inevitable outcome that I was taught by a MOW leader in a book called “Actions Speak”¹².

b) The Presenting Issue

The issue of homosexuality I do not wish particularly to discuss. It is the presenting issue on this debate so it cannot be avoided but as an issue it is of very little interest to me.

The point is in a passage like 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 we are warned that these matters are deceptive. We are warned that these matters exclude people from the Kingdom of God. There has been universal acceptance of the meaning of these words down the centuries and across the spectrum of Biblical scholarship – and while there may be scholars who today want to dispute the meanings of some words they have no agreement amongst themselves or any persuasion of the vast community of scholarship. I have seen nothing to persuade me that the words sustain some unusual meaning.

Furthermore in the context of Lambeth it was only ten years ago that the gathering of world bishops accepted the traditional attitude to sexual expression.

c) The Consecrating Bishops

So on an issue that is not marginal as it involves exclusion from the kingdom of God, a group of bishops, knowingly and intentionally consecrated an unrepentant active homosexual.

Let us be clear here – the problem is not with Gene Robinson. He is not even invited to Lambeth. It has nothing to do with homophobia – if they had consecrated an unrepentant practising heterosexual adulterer the point would be exactly the same. It is not even a matter of sex. If they had consecrated a practising unrepentant thief the point would be the same.

The reason why our bishops are not attending is because of the impossibility of Christian fellowship with the consecrating bishops. They are the false teachers who have acted in a way that makes fellowship with them impossible.

The Lambeth conference is not a debating chamber. It is the formal expression of our world fellowship. The bishops join together around the table of the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot do that with people who are practising, condoning, commending and consecrating sinfulness.

If it is believed that homosexual behaviour is right and moral, when exercised in a loving relationship, they did nothing wrong. If they believe that innocent people are being persecuted and discriminated against by our church then they did the right thing. If we

¹² Eileen Baldry and Tony Vinson (eds) Longman Cheshire 1991.

are teaching that innocent people are guilty and failing to break bread with people who are truly Christ's then we are doing the wrong thing and need to repent.

But unless you are persuaded that this was either right or a matter of indifference you cannot now be associated with these leaders in Christian fellowship. If you believe that the practice of homosexuality is sinful – such as to exclude a person from the kingdom of God – then these Bishops, acting as the leaders of Christ's church, are intolerable false teachers.

It would be important to check the facts and to make sure that they did understand what they were doing and did it intentionally. It would be important to ask them to repent. To do it slowly, carefully, politely, privately and if need be publicly. But once it is clear that this is their studied intentional position then the options are clear. Either accept them for they have done the right thing or reject them for they are in serious error. There really is no middle ground left.

The last five years have demonstrated every conceivable attempt at bringing them to repentance. All has failed.

The meeting at Lambeth is the welcome acceptance of them into the continuing fellowship of God's people.

If you believe that they are wrong there is no way you can join in such a gathering of supposed Christian fellowship. It is not a matter of preference but of obedience.

You cannot accuse others of disobeying the scriptures on homosexuality while you yourselves are disobeying equally clear commands of scripture to avoid such false teachers.

d) I Would Urge

I would urge those bishops who believe that unrepentant active homosexuality is wrong not to compromise their own beliefs, the scriptures, the church of God and the holiness of Christ. If they have already accepted the invitation they should repent and apologise. It is not good to go back on your word. But you should not have given it in the first place. And to reinforce your error of judgement by attending is to make the same mistake as Herod when he executed John the Baptist. Such faithfulness to your word and promise is perverse rationalisation for continued wrongdoing.

To those bishops who go to Lambeth knowing that unrepentant homosexual activity is wrong - your profession of evangelical credentials will always be tarnished. You cannot expect God's people to trust you as you pick and choose which parts of the Bible apply to others and apply to you.

Actions have divisive effects. You are now put under incredible pressure to act on an issue that is not your own choosing. But you cannot avoid the consequences of your action. Attending is to fellowship with false teachers in their wicked work. It cannot help but diminish faithful Christians' confidence in you as a leader. To believe otherwise is a further illustration of the naivety, which leads you to attend.

The pragmatic arguments of needing to be there to uphold orthodoxy do not wash. By being there you are denying and undermining orthodoxy. You are demonstrating that the issue does not ultimately matter and that these men are the true bishops of the church.

The American bishops believe they are right and wish to change the rest of the church into accepting homosexuality. There is not the slightest indication that they are coming to Lambeth to listen to what the orthodox have to say. This is not the first round of a debate it has been going on for years. They are not ignorant of alternative viewpoints. They came last time for the final debate and they lost. They come this time with an action that they refuse to repent of. The American bishops did not listen last time they will not listen this time.

That the Archbishop of Canterbury has invited them only shows his colours. He is on record as agreeing with the American action in principle. Orthodox bishops attending, is not going to change the outcome of Lambeth just legitimise fellowshipping with false teachers or more accurately declare that their teaching is not false.

For our own diocese we need to explain the issues clearly so people will rejoice with thankfulness to God that we are led by Godly bishops who put obedience to the word of God ahead of worldly popularity. It would also be very encouraging to them to be flooded with letters and e-mails of appreciation at this difficult time.

Address given by the Dean of Sydney, Phillip D Jensen, at the Sydney Lambeth Decision Briefing, St. Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney, Friday 14th March 2008.