

Bishop's Book Plays 'Fast and Loose' With Scripture

A review of Alan Wilson's 'More Perfect Union? Understanding Same Sex Marriage'

In his book on "Understanding Same Sex Marriage," Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham, begins "This book describes a stage in an ongoing journey towards equality" continuing, "All over the world marriage is being opened to people." And it is this idea that the Church of England must urgently embrace and indeed celebrate same-sex "marriage" as part of the world's "ongoing journey to equality" that drives *More Perfect Union*.

It's arguable that this idea might have had some merit were it not for one thing, and that thing is the Bible. Despite having three chapters called variously "Scripture 101," "Things Gays are Liable to Read in the Bible" and "Biblical Marriage," one of the things that stands out most clearly and sadly in the book is a lack of regard for the clarity, authority or weight of Scripture.

Bishop Alan's categorical statement "that very few theological problems ... can be solved definitely directly from the Bible ..." helps the reader grasp how he can repeatedly disregard and misread it, despite speaking of the importance of reading it "seriously and literally." At different points Bishop Alan describes both the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul as "playing fast and loose" with the Old Testament whilst repeatedly doing just that himself and confirming that "people who are for or against homosexuality develop self-consistent readings which are wither pro or anti-gay..."

In his curious, though by no means original, reading of the Bible's teaching on marriage as being somehow "beyond considerations of sex, gender or children," Bishop Alan omits

the foundational texts in Genesis 1 and 2 on God's creation of humankind in his image as male and female, texts to which the Lord Jesus and Paul refer to as they clarify God's teaching on marriage. This might seem odd until we grasp how central to Bishop Alan's argument for same sex "marriage" is the idea that, despite all biblical, empirical and scientific data to the contrary, "gender identity is largely a matter of the mind." The book repeatedly and contemptuously dismisses "simplistic Janet and John" (male/ female) binarism when it comes to gender identity, using specious arguments based around, for instance, the tiny proportion of babies born each year of indeterminate sex.

Here as in other parts of the book, Bishop Alan makes assertions and draws conclusions according to "science" which when footnotes are followed up reference research no more robust than, in one case, a "Facebook conversation" with someone. Perhaps realising that he is on shaky ground here Bishop Alan asserts, "Of course contemporary science is not definitive."

Accompanying Bishop Alan's lack of regard for the Bible's clear teaching, is a lack of regard for those who take it seriously as God's clear, definitive loving word. Whilst claiming that "it is wrong to label people with terms they do not own," Bishop Alan proceeds to do just that with anyone within the Church who does not agree with him, often misrepresenting their viewpoints in the process. Those who disagree with him are variously labeled as "enraged new model conservatives," those on a "1950s high horse" and "a tiny minority of conservative zealots."

At one point Bishop Alan cheerfully belittles his fellow Bishops, the Anglican Primates of the Majority World, by speaking of how at the 1998 Lambeth Conference "a tiny clique of reactionary activists played on the largely ignorant fears and fantasies of third world bishops like violins." As an assertion, it manages to be patronising, offensive and

borderline racist in its unsubstantiated and imperialistic suggestion that these “third world bishops” with their “largely ignorant” concerns are unable to think for themselves.

“How can the church find true unity?” Bishop Alan asks, concluding that it can do so only as it embraces same sex “marriage.” Any other kind of unity—for instance around the truth of Scripture—would be “narrow and stunted” because, according to Bishop Alan, “Equality”—not God’s goodness or love or holiness or justice or plan of salvation in Christ—is the most fundamental concept in the Bible’s story from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem. And it is Bishop Alan’s obsession with his idea of equality rather than the wonderful God of the Bible and Creation who made men and women in His image to reflect something of His character as they come together in marriage, that lies at the heart of the sad confusion and muddled thinking that runs throughout this polemical and poorly argued book.