

Say 'no' to cheap grace – a further response to Martyn Percy

In a response to my paper 'I wouldn't start from here – a response to Martyn Percy,' Martyn Percy was kind enough to invite me to continue the discussion with him. In this paper I shall take up this invitation by exploring the key argument that he puts forward in his more recent essay 'Sexuality and the citizenship of heaven.'¹

Developing a point made in his previous essay 'Sex, Sense and Non-Sense for Christians'² Percy contends in his new essay that '...lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians are weary of being treated as second class Christians.' This is because:

'As baptised members of their churches, living their Christian lives faithfully, and love lives lawfully, they will have full citizenship in heaven with their fellow Christians. As I said in the Radio 4 interview, 'they will not be stopped at the pearly gates and made to sit on a naughty step outside'. Or made to sit in a dark corner inside, and subjected to further vetting – or worse.

They will be welcomed in as redeemed sisters and brothers – as equals. Indeed, all Christians pray this prayer: '...thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven'. If lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians are going to be treated as equal in heaven, we, as Christians, had better do this on earth, and in the church – now. This is a theological matter, and not simply about ecclesial polity or ethical niceties.'

He then goes on to note that 'a minority of Conservative Evangelicals' would dispute this argument because they believe:

'...that lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians can only be in heaven if they are celibate on earth. The reasoning being that you might forfeit your salvation if you haven't repented of your behaviour (rather than orientation). In other words, you do have to (partly) earn your salvation. It is not by grace alone. God's love is re-cast as conditional; dependent upon good behaviour.'

This position, he says:

'...inclines towards semi-Pelagianism (a heresy condemned by the Church in 529). In this thinking, lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians are not behaving well, so they can't be 'real' Christians – or are Second Class, at best. Indeed, some may regard the very idea of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians who are in active, faithful loving relationships as an oxymoron. Yet those same Conservative Evangelicals usually have little to say about those working in banking or finance industries, or any affluent fellow-Christians also hoping for eternal bliss. Which is a pity, as Jesus had more to say about mammon than almost any other subject. Including sex.'

According to Percy the difference between the two sides on this issue matters because:

'The global Anglican Communion will only stop discriminating against lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians when it acknowledges that they will be full and equal citizens in

¹ Martyn Percy, 'Sexuality and the Citizenship of Heaven' at <http://modernchurch.org.uk/january-2016/906-sexuality-and-the-citizenship-of-heaven>

² Martyn Percy, 'Sex, Sense and Non-Sense for Anglicans' at <http://modernchurch.org.uk/news-blog/senior-cleric-calls-for-canterbury-apology>

heaven. That same epiphany has already transformed our church on race and gender. It is no accident that when the point of origin for a theology of race or gender begins with what awaits us in the kingdom of heaven, one quickly realises how fallen the church is.'

In line with this argument Percy declares at the end of this essay that an affirmation of the equal status of lesbian gay and bisexual Christians would make a good starting point for the meeting of the Anglican Primates.

'Jesus tells us that gender and sexuality won't matter in heaven – we shall be like the angels (Mt. 22.30). Paul tell us that our equality in Christ transcends our labelled identities (Gal. 3: 28), and that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10.13). So a gentle reminder that Christ died for all, receives all who receive him (Jn. 1: 12 & 3: 16), of his full atonement on the cross, his love, grace and mercy for us all – yes, even for lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians – might be a sound note on which to commence these Primatial proceedings.'

Percy's final points about the extent of God's grace are one with which even the most diehard conservative Evangelical would agree. It is marvellously true that the grace of God given to us in Jesus Christ extends to all types of people, whatever their sexuality. It is also marvellously true that our true identity is that given to us in Jesus Christ. In the words of the Evangelical 1995 St Andrew's Day Statement:

'There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality in Christ. We must be on our guard, therefore, against constructing any other ground for our identities than the redeemed humanity given us in him.'³

Because they accept these two points Evangelicals do not think, and never have thought, that people who are sexually attracted to people of their own sex (which is what they would take the terms lesbian, gay and bisexual to mean) are 'second class' Christians. If they are 'in Christ' they are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), they are children of God (John 1:12), they are those who are justified by the blood of Jesus Christ shed on their behalf (Romans 3:23-25). No higher status is possible.

What Evangelicals⁴ do think is that, precisely because they have died and risen with Christ, the words of St. Paul in Romans 6:12-13 apply to those with same-sex attraction just as much as to any other Christian:

'Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.'

This means that, like all other Christians, they should refrain from sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage between two people of the opposite sex, the sole God given context for sexual intercourse (Genesis 2:24).

This does not mean, as Percy seems to think, that Evangelicals believe that all people with same-sex attraction should be celibate. This is not the case. As Evangelicals would see it, there would be nothing wrong with them getting married to someone of the opposite sex and having sex in that

³ Church of England Evangelical Council, 'The St Andrew's Day Statement,' Application I, Text in Martin Davie, *Thinking Aloud*, London: Latimer Trust, 2015, p. 92.

⁴ This position is not, as Percy seems to suggest, a minority one with Evangelicalism. It remains the majority Evangelical approach.

context. What people with same-sex attraction are called to (just like all other Christians) is chastity, that is to say sexual abstinence outside marriage and sexual fidelity within it.⁵

As we have seen, Percy also seems to think that the Evangelical position 'inclines towards semi-Pelagianism (a heresy condemned by the Church in 529).' This claim shows a misunderstanding of what was condemned by the Church as heretical in 529 and also a failure to understand the classical teaching of the Church of England.

What was condemned at the Council of Orange in 529 was the belief that human beings are capable of loving God, believing in God, or doing what God requires, by the exercise of free will without the prior gift of divine grace. This can be seen in the conclusion to the Canons of the Council of Orange which declares:

'And thus according to the passages of holy scripture quoted above or the interpretations of the ancient Fathers we must, under the blessing of God, preach and believe as follows. The sin of the first man has so impaired and weakened free will that no one thereafter can either love God as he ought or believe in God or do good for God's sake, unless the grace of divine mercy has preceded him. We therefore believe that the glorious faith which was given to Abel the righteous, and Noah, and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and to all the saints of old, and which the Apostle Paul commends in extolling them (Heb. 11), was not given through natural goodness as it was before to Adam, but was bestowed by the grace of God. And we know and also believe that even after the coming of our Lord this grace is not to be found in the free will of all who desire to be baptized, but is bestowed by the kindness of Christ, as has already been frequently stated and as the Apostle Paul declares, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). And again, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). And again, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and it is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). And as the Apostle says of himself, "I have obtained mercy to be faithful" (1 Cor. 7:25, cf. 1 Tim. 1:13). He did not say, "because I was faithful," but "to be faithful." And again, "What have you that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7). And again, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (Jas. 1:17). And again, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven" (John 3:27). There are innumerable passages of holy scripture which can be quoted to prove the case for grace, but they have been omitted for the sake of brevity, because further examples will not really be of use where few are deemed sufficient.'⁶

The conclusion also states, however, that those who have been saved by the grace of God are called to act accordingly:

'According to the catholic faith we also believe that after grace has been received through baptism, all baptized persons have the ability and responsibility, if they desire to labor faithfully, to perform with the aid and cooperation of Christ what is of essential importance in regard to the salvation of their soul.'⁷

The position set out in these quotations is exactly the position that Evangelicals take. They hold that saving grace is a free gift of God, but that those who have received this gift are called to act, with the aid of Christ, in a way that ensures that they continue to live in a state of salvation. This, is of course,

⁵ It might be suggested at this point that it is impossible for those with same-sex attraction to enter successfully into marriage. This is simply untrue. See, for example, Rosaria Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2014 and Sean Doherty, *The Only Way is Ethics, Part 1: Sex and Marriage*, Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2015.

⁶ Council of Orange, text in J H Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, rev.ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1973, pp.43-44.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.44.

the paradoxical truth expressed by St. Paul in Philippians 2:12-13, all is of God and yet human beings must also play their part: 'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.'

In relation to sexual activity what this means is that Evangelicals hold while salvation is a matter of grace, those who have been saved (whatever forms of sexual attraction they may experience) are called with the help of Christ to live out their salvation by living a life of sexual abstinence outside marriage and sexual fidelity within it (see 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).

This position not only corresponds to the teaching of the Council of Orange, but also to the teaching of historic formularies of the Church of England.

Like the Council of Orange, Article X of the *Thirty Nine Articles* teaches that human beings cannot save themselves by the exercise of their free will, but are wholly dependent on the grace of God:

'The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will.'

However, Article XII then goes on to insist that those who are saved will necessarily perform good works as the fruit of their faith:

'Albeit that good works, which are the fruits of faith and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins and endure the severity of God's judgement, yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith, insomuch that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.'

Because the Anglican Reformers held that good works are fruit of a 'true and lively faith' they urged people not to deceive themselves about their state before God should good works not be present in their lives. We can see this in the homily on 'The True, Lively and Christian faith' in the *First Book of Homilies*. This states:

'Let us therefore (good Christian people) try and examine our faith, what it is: let us not flatter ourselves, but look upon our works, and so judge of our faith what it is. Christ himself speaketh of this matter, and saith (Matt.12:33), *The tree is known by the fruit*. Therefore let us do good works, and thereby declare our faith to be the lively Christian faith. Let us by such virtues as ought to spring out of faith, show our election to be sure and stable, as St. Peter teacheth (2 Peter 1:10): *Endeavour yourselves to make your calling and choosing certain, by good works*. And also he saith, *Minister or declare in your faith virtue, in virtue knowledge, in knowledge temperance, in temperance patience, again in patience godliness, in godliness brotherly charity, in brotherly charity love* (1 Peter 5:7). So shall we show indeed that we have the very lively Christian faith; and may so both certify our conscience the better that we be in the right faith, and also by these means confirm other men. If these fruits do not follow, we do but mock with God, deceive ourselves, and also other men. Well may we bear the name of Christian men, but we do lack the true faith that doeth belong thereunto. For true faith doeth ever bring forth good works, as St. James saith (James 2:18). *Show me thy faith by thy deeds*. Thy deeds and works must be an open testimonial of thy faith; otherwise thy faith, being without good works, is but the devils faith, the faith of the wicked, a fantasy of faith, and not a true Christian faith. And like as the devils and evil people be nothing the better for their counterfeit faith, but it is unto them the more cause of damnation: so they that be christened, and have received knowledge of God, and of Christ's merits, and yet of a set purpose do live idly, without good works, thinking the name of a

naked faith to be either sufficient for them, or else setting their minds upon vain pleasures of this world, do live in sin without repentance, not uttering the fruits that do belong to such an high profession; upon such presumptuous persons, and wilful sinners, must needs remain the great vengeance of God, and eternal punishment in hell, prepared for the devil and wicked livers.’⁸

Once again this is the position that Evangelicals take. They hold with Article X that salvation is wholly dependent on the grace of God, but they also hold with Article XII and the homily just cited that saving faith elicited by the grace of God necessarily shows itself in good works, among which is a life of sexual holiness. Where these good works are not present, and where there is life of sin without repentance, saving faith does not exist.

Percy might want to say at this point that those in same-sex relationships do produce good works in that there are Christians who live in ‘faithful and loving’ same-sex relationships. From an Evangelical perspective such relationships are not, as Percy suggests, an oxymoron. Faithful and loving same-sex relationships do exist.

However, the presence of such virtuous elements in a same-sex relationship does not mean that the relationship itself is not sinful. For example, an adulterous, incestuous, or polygamous relationship could be both faithful and loving, but this would not mean that it was not sinful. Or, to take another example, a group of thieves could exhibit virtues such as courage, wisdom, loyalty, or fortitude, but this would not make their activity any the less a breach of the eighth commandment. Whatever their other virtues, sexually active same-sex relationships necessarily fail to exhibit the virtue of chastity and for this reason have to be judged as sinful and requiring repentance and amendment of life.

Percy’s essay also raises the question of why Evangelicals do not address the behaviour of ‘those working in banking or finance industries, or any affluent fellow-Christians also hoping for eternal bliss.’ There are two responses to this. First, Evangelicals do actually address the question of how wealthy Christians ought to behave in world of widespread poverty.⁹ Secondly, it is not clear why the mere fact of someone working in banking or finance (who may not personally be wealthy), or indeed the fact that someone is affluent, necessarily raises questions of whether they are sinning. Why does Percy think this is the case?

In conclusion, the issue currently facing the Anglican Communion is not that Evangelicals view those with same-sex attraction as second class Christians. They do not.

Nor is it that Evangelicals want everyone with same-sex attraction to be celibate. They do not.

Nor is it that Evangelicals hold a Semi-Pelagian view of salvation akin to that condemned at the Council of Orange in 529. They do not. They hold to the biblical, Catholic and Anglican position that salvation is entirely due to the free grace of God, but that those who have received saving grace will necessarily live a life of good works, which includes, among other things, living a life of sexual holiness.

The real issue facing the Anglican Communion, and the issue hovering in the background of Percy’s essay, is the issue of cheap grace.

In his classic discussion of this issue in *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

‘Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. ‘All for sin

⁸ Ian Robinson (ed), *The Homilies*, Bishopstone: Brynmill/Preservation Press, 2006, pp.33-34.

⁹ See, for example, John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1984, ch.12, Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, Leicester: IVP, 1999 and Marijke Hoek, Justin Thacker et al, *Micah’s Challenge: The Church’s Responsibility to the Global Poor*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2008.

could not atone.’ The world goes on in the same old way, and we are still sinners ‘even in the best life’ as Luther said. Well, then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world’s standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin.’¹⁰

As Bonhoeffer goes on to say, the problem with this view of grace is that it:

‘...amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from who sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the forgiveness we bestow on ourselves.’¹¹

What those like Percy who take a revisionist position on human sexuality are arguing for is exactly cheap grace. Percy’s position is precisely that those who experience same-sex attraction are in the right before God because of grace even if they continue to live a life of sin by engaging in same-sex sexual activity.

As Anglicans we have to say ‘no’ to cheap grace. What we have to teach and practice instead is what Bonhoeffer calls ‘costly grace.’ ‘Such grace,’ he writes:

‘...is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.’¹²

To proclaim costly grace means declaring that all people, regardless of their sexual attraction, must practice sexual abstinence outside (heterosexual) marriage and sexual fidelity within it. If Anglicans faithfully proclaim this message they will be unpopular and encounter strong opposition from a world that does not want its sinfulness to be challenged, but they will be blessed. As Jesus said ‘Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you’ (Matthew 5:11-12).

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¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London: SCM, 1959, p.35.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.36

¹² *Ibid*, p.37.