

Personal Perspective

A significant feature of the Conversations was the emphasis on personal experience and story sharing. This was indeed a lovely, moving and relationship-building time. In fact the whole experience, although at times tense because of differing views, was for me a positive time because of the personal sharing. I have always enjoyed good relationship with people who differ from myself on the issue of sexuality. It is because of the importance of personal story and belief that this issue is so important.

Sensitivity to a personal perspective

At Hothorpe Hall it felt to me as though great effort was made to give every person space to be heard clearly and carefully, apart from one.

God.

Since the very beginning of the history of the church the Apostolic writers were regarded as bringing the very words of God (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet 3:15-16). It has been known for centuries as the 'holy' bible - because God himself authored it, despite it coming through the ordinary and imperfect agency of human writers. I recently learned how copiously the Early Fathers quoted from gospels and letters - because it was God's Word to them. No doubt there are some parts of scripture that are unclear and difficult, but the significant body of scripture is in fact pretty straightforward. God in his mercy has provided us with a very understandable testimony.

Given the strong emphasis at Shared Conversations on personal story, I was surprised and saddened by the ease with which some people appeared to minimise scripture. Several people said to me "many of the key passages are ambiguous and can be interpreted in various ways". I wonder how God must have felt to hear this. When we broke into small groups to tell each other about our personal journeys, there was space given to pause, reflect and ask questions for clarification. The two people who listened to my story were very respectful and handled the details of my story tenderly. Hopefully they felt that I did the same with theirs. There wasn't any attempt to change each other's story to fit in with our own views. Yet on the few occasions when the bible was referred to, scripture seemed to be something that could be seen as a secondary source compared to the authority of present day personal testimony. Were we being sensitive to God himself?

A Honest Conversation

There was one beautiful exception. Given my real interest in genuinely trying to understand a liberal perspective of the key scriptures in question, on the second day I invited everyone to help me with this matter at an 'open topic' slot. At first there was no response at all (perhaps because such an invitation was intimidating), but eventually one man offered to share his thoughts with me. We met later, and he was very gracious and kind. He had even written a pamphlet to explain his position. I have already read a number of publications on sexuality, and so I was very familiar with the ways in which arguments have commonly been made. What was refreshing about this conversation was his reserve - his admission that many of his conclusions were tentative - he recognised that a number of his scriptural interpretations weren't clear and obvious, and that very opposite views could also be made. He also stressed that no one should discount any of the texts, which I felt had happened in one or two previous conversations.

After a few helpful exchanges he eventually said "Is it ok if we stop talking about the bible now?" - As a gay man it had perhaps been painful for him to keep looking at passages that weren't actually very ambiguous at all.

I respected this man for his honesty and his attempt to honour God's word. Some others from a liberal perspective also said that they would talk further with me at some point. The next day, one of the Facilitators quietly asked me how my scripture conversation had gone. I explained that, despite the exchange being very helpful, I still hadn't found anything of substance that properly dealt with the clear passages on the subject of homosexuality. The Facilitator said to me "But perhaps that doesn't matter?"

Perhaps it doesn't matter?

This was the single comment that gave me the greatest concern. The 'neutral' Facilitators were very focused on contemporary dialogue, but seemed to have less concern for God and his story. God and his testimony.

Conclusion

I came away thinking that, though I had met a number of very nice Christians, the general level of love and respect for God's word was low. I felt saddened that God's words had been somehow relegated below our own experience and stories. I had hoped for a great deal more rigour in looking at his word to us. Given the collective belief in Jesus as our sacrificial and risen Saviour (which can only be deduced from a great confidence in scripture) I was puzzled by the incoherence of the liberal perspective. I am still keen to find somebody who can give me a more comprehensive answer.

Rev Andrew Attwood

After Conversations at Hothorpe Hall