

427 How theology impacts church policy

When one has strong feelings about a topic, as I have, it's very difficult to remain objective, but it's important that I try to do so. That's why I was very unhappy when a fellow Christian used a highly emotive term in public: 'homosexuality is an abomination!'^[426]

A long-time prayer companion, 'Chris', is changing churches after 17 years as a lady in a gay marriage has been given a leadership role. In a clumsy attempt to get Chris to rethink, I suggested that if gay sex is immoral, then surely just banning them from leadership isn't strong enough. The first reaction was that I was being too harsh, but after further thought: yes, if a gay couple are unrepentant, they should be asked to leave the church. I was very sorry, but I commended Chris – that really is having the courage of your convictions.

Gushee suggests that churches and individuals can be 'traditionalist', 'revisionist' or 'avoidist', and while any typology is going to be a crude simplification, could it help in our discussion? I did say,^[426] that the last term sounds harsh, given all that leaders have to deal with; but is it right to avoid the issue, given that some young gay Christians have actually committed suicide over this?

After speaking to Chris, I discussed it with a local vicar (not my vicar); their church welcomes gay people, but they are not 'pro gay marriage'; neither are they 'anti gay marriage'. Because theologians are divided as to whether gay sex is always immoral, their church says that we should agree to disagree, and not have policies that force one specific view. We need to work together on building the kingdom.

But if it actually *is* immoral then the traditionalists are right, surely? We shouldn't tolerate it. Difficult, isn't it?! Maybe traditionalists should decide that gay sex within a lifelong relationship is less immoral than other things and therefore apply less stringent sanctions?

Trying to think about this logically and objectively, revisionists (e.g. me) say: there are different theological views, different biblical interpretations, so we have to leave it to the individual's conscience, and not force people to obey a specific church ruling. But the traditional view is that there is no room for 'interpretation', the Bible is clear, so we *should* impose a specific rule – it's a matter of principle. Difficult, isn't it?

Can you see a solution? If traditionalists are unwilling to compromise on their principles – and I respect them for that – then churches may simply have to split. If a church is revisionist then folk like Chris may feel they have to leave. We left our church after 37 years, but thankfully only for practical reasons; however, having changed our minds on this issue, and because that church seems to have become more strongly traditionalist, we wouldn't feel able to go back.

This really is a very difficult situation, folks! Sadly, I can't see any real solution, can you?

Paul Bev. 9.5.26