

**SEX
PLEASURE
AND THE
ARCHBISHOP**

**A CRITIQUE OF
ROWAN WILLIAMS'
'THE BODY'S GRACE'**

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GERALD
BRAY**

SEX, PLEASURE AND THE ARCHBISHOP.

For better or for worse, it appears that the homosexual issue will dominate the opening months, if not years, of Archbishop Williams' primacy. Evangelicals have taken the credit (or the blame) for this, because of their open opposition to the archbishop's stated views on the subject, but in fairness to all concerned, it ought to be recorded that neither Evangelicals nor other conservatives in the Church of England who agree with them on this matter, have the most at stake in the discussion. Rather, this honour belongs to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, which as long ago as 1989 invited the then Professor Williams to deliver the tenth Michael Harding Memorial Address, which he called *The body's grace*. After languishing in relative obscurity for thirteen years, this address has now been reprinted by the LGCM as a reminder to us all that, as the quote on the back cover from Eugene F. Rogers (editor of *Theology and sexuality, classic and contemporary readings*) says, it is 'the best lecture about sexuality in the twentieth century. Williams aims to show how committed same-sex relationships fit well with what Christians have said about the purpose of marriage, celibacy and the Christian life.' Mr Rogers might have added that it also provides us with a classic example of Dr Williams' method of debating an issue, which makes reading it a matter of some importance for all those who want to disagree with him on this, or on any other subject.

Dr Williams' method is to start by advancing a thesis - in this case, that sexual intercourse was intended by God to give pleasure to those who engage in it. This thesis is not supported by any evidence, other than what can be derived from Paul Scott's *Raj* quartet, a series of novels whose canonical status (in either the religious or the literary sphere) is at best unknown. Dr Williams then proceeds to put forward an alternative position, viz., that sexual intercourse was designed primarily to ensure the reproduction of the human race, a view which has supposedly dominated Christian thinking to the point that any

other dimension has been ignored or condemned as immoral. He then goes on to demolish this second assumption, discrediting traditional Christian teaching in the process. Once this is accomplished, the pleasure principle is left to dominate the field, and homosexuality comes into its own.

For Dr Williams goes on to claim that homosexual activity is by definition a radical rejection of the idea that reproduction is the chief end of sexual intercourse, and therefore a witness to the primacy of the pleasure principle, assuming that homosexuals engage in sexual acts primarily for that reason. If that is the case, and pleasure is the main object of sexual activity, then far from being pariahs, homosexuals are significant witnesses to the God-given nature of human sexuality. In the modern church, they may even be prophets, denouncing the false idolatries of the past and opening up new dimensions of both personal satisfaction and divine worship. It all follows logically - once we accept Dr Williams' premisses. Those who disagree with his conclusions are liable to find that they have been painted into a corner, since to condemn homosexual practice is to say that there is no joy in sexual intercourse, which in turn is a denial of the purposes of the Creator! Obviously we do not want to say that, so we are left, as Dr Williams would claim, holding an inconsistent position (based on a mixture of tradition and prejudice) which has to be dissolved and refashioned by the healing art of reason.

If we ever hope to answer him, it is necessary to go back to the basic assumptions on which his argument is built, and show that they are by no means as solid or as obvious as he would like to think. To say that sexual intercourse is meant to be pleasurable for those who engage in it is one thing; to imply that pleasure is its primary purpose or justification is quite another. The Bible does not say that, nor does it say that the reproduction of the human race is the only reason why sexual intercourse exists. In other words, Dr Williams' thesis and its alternative are both wrong. The Genesis account and the rest of Scripture make it quite clear that the purpose of sexual

intercourse is to bind one man and one woman together, so that the two may become 'one flesh'. In many (and probably most) cases this will result in offspring, but that is by no means inevitable, nor does reproduction determine whether the union is valid or not. The Christian church has always maintained that an unconsummated marriage can be dissolved, but not a childless one, because it is sexual intercourse and not the production of children which creates the one-flesh bond. When sexual intercourse is used for some other purpose, it is abused, as the Apostle Paul pointed out to the Corinthians when he warned them against sleeping with prostitutes. Those who did so were establishing a fleshly union which involved no commitment, and therefore served only to devalue the whole activity. It is no surprise that in our modern society, when this principle has been widely rejected, the result has been a general devaluation of marriage and the resultant break-up of families which has created a whole new form of social instability.

The idea that pleasure is an end in itself is another notion which has no support, either from Scripture or from common sense. Those who have been to Cambridge may recall having seen, just off the market square, a bronze plaque containing a nineteenth-century Ode to tobacco. The pleasures of the weed are celebrated in verse and publicised for all to read. But would anyone seriously argue that the pleasure derived from smoking is sufficient justification for making it a socially acceptable practice? Like homosexual intercourse, smoking serves no utilitarian purpose and can only be justified on the basis of the pleasure it gives to those who do it, but are there not serious reasons for suggesting that this pleasure is a form of abuse? The same thing applies to drugs, of course, and may even be extended to paedophilia or mass murder. Some people enjoy these activities, but is the pleasure derived from them justification for allowing them to indulge their desires without restraint?

The conclusion must be that pleasure cannot be an end worth pursuing in itself, regardless of other considerations. The Bible tells us that true pleasure comes from obeying God's Word (cf. Psalm 19:8 etc.). If we do that, then we shall derive pleasure from whatever we do. In sexual intercourse, true pleasure will come when it is practised according to God's Word - in lifelong, heterosexual monogamy - and not otherwise. Of course, homosexuals may dispute this (they have a vested interest in doing so), but it is extremely doubtful whether the evidence available can support their claim. Anyone who goes to a homosexual support group will soon notice that it is remarkably like Alcoholics Anonymous, full of people scarred by life and burnt out by having indulged their desires to excess. The use of the word 'gay' bears this out - it is a total and quite deliberate inversion of the truth, intended to conceal the unpleasant reality by using a more acceptable euphemism.

To return to Dr Williams and his argument, the most fundamental difference between him and Evangelicals lies in the realm of authority. For Dr Williams, there really is no authority as such; what he is looking for is an acceptable consensus based on observations, experiences and interpretations of the contemporary world, which then have to be related to something we might call Christian. The Church's traditional teaching will inevitably come off badly in this exercise, because it was not developed along those lines to begin with. What we believe and teach has been given to us in Scripture by a God who spoke at particular historical moments, yes, but with implications which are valid for all time. We do not pretend that it is always easy to apply the teaching of the Bible to current realities, and Christians have often differed over the details. Where we are united though, is in our basic approach to the problem. We take the Bible as God's Word written, and ask how it can best be applied to our current circumstances, whatever they may be. We do not seek to rewrite the text (still less to ignore it) if it does not lend itself to modern perceptions and desires. To put it another way, we judge Paul Scott's Raj quartet (and other works of modern literature) by the Word of

God, not the other way round! We pass judgment on the unbelieving world, however unpleasant that may sometimes be, and do not let that world pass judgment on us. If this sounds arrogant, then all we can say is that we pass judgment on ourselves first of all - we are the least of all saints, unfit for our calling except by the grace of God at work in our lives. His grace is a transforming power which gives us pleasure, but only because it conforms us to obedience to his holy Word. It is not a quality inherent in the body, or in anything else; rather, it is the free gift of God, given to turn sinners to the way of righteousness and truth.

Anything else is false, and will eventually be revealed as such. The difference between Rowan Williams' beliefs and Evangelical faith is the difference between natural and revealed religion. We start in different places, think along different lines and end up with different conclusions. Unless and until we grasp this fundamental fact, we shall neither understand one another. We shall never agree, of course, but at least we shall know why, and perhaps engage in a real discussion of the fundamental issues at stake, rather than get caught up with details which, however interesting and important they may be, fail to address the essential point.

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