

JOHN STOTT

SAME SEX
RELATIONSHIPS

Foreword

by The Most Revd and Rt Hon

Dr John Sentamu

ARCHBISHOP OF YORK

In the many conversations on marriage and sexuality in which, willingly or unwillingly, Anglican Christians across the world are currently engaged, it is only right that a variety of voices are heard, expressing a wide range of lived Christian experience and perspective. So I am grateful that this short chapter from Dr Stott's book *Issues Facing Christians Today*, written more than three decades ago, is being made available once again, both as a contribution to ongoing debate and as a sharing of pastoral encouragement that has been found helpful by many.

I am aware that not all will agree with his conclusions, but for me John Stott's greatest gift was his commitment to "double listening"—a practice that is an essential ingredient to proper discussion of these issues. In an interview for *Ministry Magazine* in January 1997 John Stott said:

By double listening, I mean listening, of course, to God and to the Word of God, but listening to the voices of the modern world as well. Now, I make it clear that in listening to the modern world, we are not listening with the same degree of respect as that with which we listen to the voice of God. We listen to Him in order to believe and obey what He says.

When people write to me, as they often do, complaining that, to them, it seems the church is more influenced by the moral standards of the world than by the teaching of Scripture, I have a good deal of sympathy for their unease. We cannot expect Christ and contemporary culture always to be in harmony.

However, we must not forget that we are all children of a particular time and place, and that all of us are deeply conditioned by the context of our birth and nurture. So wherever in the world we live, it is our duty as Christians, especially where there is disagreement over moral issues which affect us all, to listen with real respect to the testimonies, not only of those with whom we agree, but also of those whose experience is a challenge to us. How we read and interpret Scripture will inevitably be influenced by the experience we each bring to our reading, and we must listen both to the whole of Scripture and to Scripture as a whole.

Above all we can have confidence in the risen Christ, who promised to send the Holy Spirit to his church! To each of us God speaks, in Scripture and in life, both in compassion and with a call to holiness, and to the priorities of the kingdom. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we seek to listen to God and to the word of God, and give us grace to listen to the world also.

+Sentamu Eboracensis

Foreword

by Mark Labberton

PRESIDENT OF FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

John Stott's writing offers disciples thoughtful oxygen for faithful Christian life. Over and over again throughout the course of his life, preaching, and writing, this was the gift that kept pouring forth from John Stott. He would be humbly grateful to hear this affirmation, but would immediately point to the source of such replenishing and renewing air in Jesus Christ, through the unique and authoritative witness of the Scriptures.

Nowhere has this air been more needed than at the many intersections of faith and culture, where sufficient oxygen can seem in low supply. The more intense, passionate and conflicted the debates over matters of life and faith, the more constricted the air supply often seems to be.

When Dr Stott first published *Issues Facing Christians Today*, this chapter on same-sex relationships was landing in a time when the public and Christian consensus about homosexual

relationships was solidly and pervasively traditional. The issues were unavoidable for a person as thoughtful as John; but no one then would have imagined the sweeping shift toward a public acceptance of homosexuality that now manifests itself in both the UK and in the USA. The speed and pervasiveness of this shift throughout the world is an unprecedented social change.

In the midst of this head-spinning period, the people of God can continue to benefit greatly from what Dr Stott offers here as a biblical and theological as well as pastoral framework for same-sex issues. While denominations and congregations are currently debating, if not dividing over, these matters, this brief chapter masterfully expresses a compassionate and humane articulation of the church's historic biblical convictions.

Despite a cultural shift in attitudes toward sexuality, thoughtful Christians must continue to wrestle over such profound and intimate issues in order to allow our obedience to Christ and our faithfulness to Scripture to direct us.

Read this reflection from John Stott slowly and carefully. Breathe deeply of this oxygen of faithfulness, compassion, and truth, and then live wisely and humbly in a church and world that needs such truth and grace.

Mark Labberton

Editor's Preface

by Sean Doherty

It's a daunting privilege for any scholar to be asked to edit an essay by so distinguished and justly admired a figure as John Stott. In my case, there was an additional reason why it felt especially so.

As a new Christian, I came to realise in my late teens that I was gay; and, not quite ready to tell anyone else yet, I wanted to know what my new-found faith said about my sexuality. Almost at random in a local Christian bookshop, I picked up a copy of *Authentic Christianity*, an anthology of Stott's writings covering a wide variety of topics.¹ I looked up homosexuality, and found an excerpt which I now know to be from the chapter on same-sex relationships in Stott's book *Issues Facing Christians Today*, which forms the basis for this book. Here is what I read:

1 *Authentic Christianity: From the Writings of John Stott*. Chosen and introduced by Timothy Dudley-Smith. (IVP, 1995).

We are all human beings. That is to say, there is no such phenomenon as “a homosexual”. There are only people, human persons, made in the image and likeness of God, yet fallen ... However strongly we may disapprove of homosexual practices, we have no liberty to dehumanise those who engage in them.²

There was a further excerpt, from another publication, as follows:

Acceptance ... of a same-sex partnership rests on the assumption that sexual intercourse is “psychologically necessary” ... Christians must surely reply that it is a lie ... Authentic human fulfilment is possible without sexual experience ... Jesus himself, though unmarried, was perfect in his humanness. Same-sex friendships should of course be encouraged, which may be close, deep and affectionate. But sexual union, the “one flesh” mystery, belongs to heterosexual marriage alone.³

Although I still had lots of thinking and studying ahead of me, it was so helpful that the first Christian thing I ever read on the subject was clear that my identity is in Christ and not my sexuality, that my sexuality was no more fallen than anyone else's, that I am made in the image of God and that my sexuality does not undermine that, and that sex is not necessary for fulfilment.

Above all, Stott pointed me to the example of Jesus and the fact that my sexuality by no means implied that I would

2 *Ibid.*, p. 374.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 374-5.

be lonely, but that I could experience deep, close and affectionate friendship—which, as I later discovered, John Stott’s own personal example so visibly demonstrated. Even in these brief excerpts, there was so much that was affirming of me personally, and yet that was wonderfully Christ-centred. Even as a new Christian, I could tell they had the ring of authentic Christianity.

It was so helpful that it was in this personally affirming and Christ-centred context that I encountered not only the teaching that same-sex sexual practice is not a legitimate option for Christians, even in a loving and committed relationship, but also the rationale for such a belief: namely that sex belongs to marriage between a woman and a man as the means of joining them as “one flesh”. I thank God for John Stott’s warm and compassionate tone, for his conviction and clear explanation, and for the fact that *Authentic Christianity* was the book that came into my hands that day!

So, while I remain daunted, I am also thrilled that Stott’s writing on same-sex unions will now enjoy a fresh lease of life—although I found it remarkably up-to-date even before editing. Reading something originally written in 1984 brings into sharp focus the fact that the arguments put forward today in favour of the church affirming same-sex relationships are not new and do not rest on fresh evidence or even fresh readings of the biblical text. It is startling to realise for just how long some of these ideas have been circulating—and indeed how roundly they were rebutted by Stott so many years ago!

Some brief comments with respect to how I went about editing the text might be in order. Indeed, why edit it at all and not simply republish it? The absolute priority was obviously to

let Stott's original writing speak for itself with its characteristic vigour and warmth. I have therefore kept my interventions to a strict minimum.

However, there was a need to update Chapter 1 substantially to take account of contemporary sociological research into the incidence of homosexuality, although this does not affect the substance of what Stott says. Then, it was important to change some terminology to bring it into line with contemporary usage. I have omitted some material which was not directly relevant to Stott's argument. In one or two places I have taken the liberty of adding an update to what Stott originally wrote (and in one case registering a disagreement with his argument!), but have clearly differentiated my editorial notes from the original text.

It remains for me to thank Bishops Keith Sinclair and Timothy Dudley-Smith for their encouragement to undertake this project, Tim Thornborough of The Good Book Company for his guidance and editorial oversight, Revd Dr Chris Wright and John Stott's other literary executors for so willingly giving their approval to the project and offering some constructive suggestions, and all those who contributed their personal stories. I pray that other young gay Christians will find in this new edition that precious combination of compassion, affirmation and clarity which was of such help to me all those years ago.