

PROPOSED TABLE TALK TOPICS
31st March 2006

Topic 1

A number of attempts have been made to have meaningful interfaith dialogue between representatives of all the major world religions. In view of Bible passages such as John 14:6 (which appear to insist on the exclusiveness of the salvation offered by Jesus Christ) is such interfaith dialogue meaningful or indeed even possible for devout Christians.

Topic 2

What should our attitude as Christians be towards the legalisation of same sex marriage, which is either underway or already in force in a number of countries.

Topic 3

What should our attitude as Christians be towards the increasing number of same sex couples who are cohabiting together without being married, and in many cases without any intention of becoming married.

TABLE TALK REFLECTIONS
31st March 2006

Topic 1

Christianity is unique amongst all world religions. You can choose not to believe this, but if you don't believe it you can hardly call yourself a Christian. Christianity is based on the historical revelations of Yahweh to mankind through actual historical events commencing with his revelations to the Patriarchs, the Exodus and finally his final and supreme revelation through Jesus – the incarnation, death and resurrection.

The revelation of Jesus (in terms of his existence and crucifixion) is supported by many historical sources including contemporary non-Christian historians such as Josephus, Tacitus, Julius Africanus, The Talmud, Lucian of Samosa and Mara Bar Serapion. For Christians he is completely unique as the God/Man who was crucified, died and rose to life again.

Christians also must assert that Jesus is unique in that he offers the only route to salvation :-
“Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 NIV)

“Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12 NIV)

“And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1John 5:11-12 NIV)

To say that a person may adopt any form of religion and still find acceptance with God would be a denial of these biblical truths. Sincere belief in a false teaching does not provide a valid way to God. The Christian message is that persons who submit themselves to Jesus Christ,

acknowledging their sins and desiring his salvation, may be assured of everlasting life (John 3:36).

In John 10:1-15, Jesus speaks of himself as the "door", and "the good shepherd." Among other things, Jesus affirms: (1) that there is only one shepherd giving eternal life (namely, Jesus himself); (2) that there is only one door leading to life (namely, Jesus); (3) that there are others who pretend to be doors or shepherds, but they are thieves and robbers. We must conclude from this passage that Jesus is the only good shepherd (the only door) that leads to life.

Jesus accepted worship on nine occasions in the Gospels--worship that Exodus 34:14 claims is reserved for God alone, thus our Lord Jesus claimed divinity. Jesus calmly announced many times in the four Gospels that He would rise from the dead; He claimed He could forgive sins; when He made clear statements like, "I and the Father are one," and "Before Abraham was born, I AM;" – thereby claiming divinity. He healed the sick and broke up every funeral He attended with a resurrection; He controlled nature, and declared that He had authority to give eternal life—here again Jesus claimed to be God!

If Jesus is God and also appears in the form of a man then he is completely unique. As C S Lewis said – he was either a liar, a maniac, a devil from hell or exactly what he claimed to be. What we cannot say is that he is a “good man”. He did not leave that alternative open to us. He did not intend to.

Strangely enough Jesus is even proclaimed to be unique in the Qur’an. This book proclaims the virgin birth (Surah 19 v16-34; 4 v156; 21 v91; 3 v47); the sinlessness of Jesus (19 v19) – and that alone amongst all the prophets as all others have sin attributed to them in the Qur’an; the ascension of Jesus (4 v158); the second coming (43 v61). Given that even Mohamed did not have these attributes, I think that even the Qur’an makes the uniqueness of Jesus totally clear.

In the end we can take an “Exclusivist” position and proclaim that Jesus is the only way to God and all others are damned or taken an “Inclusivist” position that there is room for the salvation other than through profession of faith in Jesus. Colossians 1: 19-20 is usually cited in favour of this view. However, it is difficult to support anything other than “conversional” evangelism in view of the clear scriptural statements from John and Acts cited above. The safe position is that we can only be certain that faith in Jesus brings salvation, all other courses may well lead to its loss.

Topic 2

In my view Christians should be opposed to all sexual relationships other than monogamous, lifelong, faithful relationships between one man and one woman – what we would call marriage. This is a “creation ordinance” originating before the Fall as part of God’s gifts to mankind. God perceived that it was not good for man to be alone and therefore decided to create a helper for him as no existing creature was suitable (Genesis 2:18). That helper and companion was woman. The relationship between man and woman is intended to be one of self giving love and faithfulness which finds its natural expression in sexual union, or becoming one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

Although, as I said, this all pre-dates the Fall, these needs have been strengthened because of the Fall and the need for loving companionship of marriage is greater than ever. However, I believe the Bible teaches that this can only rightly occur between persons of the opposite sex.

We must acknowledge that a homosexual bent or orientation is quite common, but we must distinguish between that and physical homosexual practices. I do not think that a homosexual orientation is of itself sinful, but I do believe that physical homosexual practices are. Of course, I would be the first to concede that such practices are less sinful in the context of a committed homosexual relationship than a 'one night stand', but that is not to say they are Biblically justified.

Many countries take the view that they are justifiable in a secular context. Denmark was the first country to legalise homosexual marriage in May 1989 and today South Africa is about to join the long list of countries that have done so.

There are four groups of Biblical passages which appear to refer to homosexuality negatively: (i) the story of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-13) and the similar story of Gibeah (Judges 19), (ii) the Levitical texts (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), (iii) the apostles Paul's comments on decadent pagan society (Romans 1:18-32) and (iv) Paul's two lists of sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11).

- (i) There is no question that the people of Sodom were sinning, but some authors have suggested that the sin may not have been homosexuality. This is largely on the basis that other references to Sodom in the OT (primarily Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah) do not state that the sin was homosexuality. Similar arguments have been made in relation to the Gibeah story. However, a close analysis of the text does not really make this view credible.
- (ii) Here many have argued that the Levitical texts prohibit many other things which are not normally regarded as sinful. I do not accept this argument, because as I argued when we debated Christian obedience to OT commandments, we must look at the original commandments in their context and re-interpret them for today. Looked at in that way it seems to me that homosexuality is just as objectionable today as it was in those OT times.
- (iii) It has been argued that Paul's statements in Romans do not apply to committed homosexual partnerships. I reject this from arguments in relation to the natural created order later.
- (iv) Here it has been argued that Paul is condemning older men for having sex with young boys playing a passive role and that this does not apply to committed consenting homosexual relationships. Again I do not accept this limitation.

I believe all of the above passages make sense when interpreted in the light of the Bible's positive teaching on human sexuality and heterosexual marriage. Jesus himself endorsed the "one flesh" teaching on Genesis 2:24 when he declared that such a lifelong union between a man and a woman was God's intent from the beginning (Mark 10:4-9). Scripture defines the union God instituted as the union of one man with one woman, publically acknowledged, permanently sealed and physically consummated. Scripture envisages no other kind of union or marriage – God provided no alternative plan.

Many homosexuals have argued that the Biblical prohibitions are culturally conditioned and no longer apply. If all we had was the prohibition texts, it might be difficult to counter this

argument. However, once those texts are put together with the texts ordaining marriage that we have just been considering, I believe we have a divine revelation which is universally applicable. God established his order of heterosexual monogamous marriage when he created man and anything else is incompatible with that created order.

Homosexuals sometimes argue that God made them that way, so this must be good. This is to accept a purely subjective view of what is good and normal. When Paul wrote of women who “had exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones” and of men who had “abandoned natural relations” in Romans 1 he meant by “nature” the natural order of things which God created and established. Paul was condemning behaviour which was against that order.

Homosexuals have also argued that it is the quality of the relationship which matters. However, this is essentially to elevate romantic or sexual love above moral law. If we take this view then polygamy and polyandry are certainly justifiable.

Topic 3

As we have already seen the only God approved type of sexual relationship is a heterosexual, lifelong, committed, monogamous loving relationship which is fully acknowledged by the couple and by society. We call this marriage.

Cohabitation lacks the necessary qualities of permanence, biblical sacrificial love, vows, public acknowledgement. That is not to say that all marriages have these qualities, but they are more prevalent within marriage. Marriage also provides a better framework for the rearing and nurture of children. Unfortunately cohabitation is on the increase. Many young people do not want the permanence of a married relationship or mistakenly believe that it is a good preparation for marriage – despite the statistics which show that marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to break down than those not so preceded¹.

We can conclude that (a) cohabitation is on the increase, (b) it is wrong from a Biblical perspective and (c) leads to unfortunate consequences from a secular perspective (such as higher rates of child mortality², higher rates of abortion³, higher rates of infection with sexually transmitted diseases⁴, higher rates of neurotic disorders⁵, less effective child care combined with a higher chance of a breakdown of the relationship and etc.). Christians in general and the Church in particular ought to be making much greater efforts to promulgate effective teaching here. It is not enough for this to be done from the pulpit, we must reach out to the unchurched majority – in fact this necessity has now been recognised by the Church of England⁶.

¹ UK Department of Health Survey published 1995

² UK Department of Health Survey published 1995

³ Anne Johnson and Jane Wadsworth *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles*

⁴ Ibid

⁵ UK Department of Health Survey published 1995

⁶ York Diocesan Synod Paper GS Misc 729B at p2

