

Blessings evening 2: Dan's clarifications

Would gay people be welcome in St James? How would you treat them?

Gay people are already welcome in St James. 8 or 10 people in our survey said they identify as LGBTQ+ and as I said last time, you are all precious members of our fellowship. I don't know who all of you are, but I hope I treat you in the same way that I treat everyone else.

I wonder if this question is really asking whether a gay couple would be welcome in St James? Yes they would. As I said last time, we did have a young couple a few years ago – two female students. We welcomed them into the congregation and a cell group; one of them I think served on the audio team for a while if I remember rightly. I met with them to hear some of their story; I heard some of the hurt they'd felt at the way other churches had treated them in the past. I hope that the way we welcomed them as a congregation helped to model Christ to them. They didn't ask me what I thought about their relationship, so I decided not to tell them; pastorally, that didn't feel the right time. In the end, they moved to a different part of the country. If they'd been here when I was preaching about relationship, or when this current debate was beginning to brew, I'd have met with them and gently explained my understanding of the Scriptures, looking at some of the biblical texts. I wouldn't have made agreeing with my position a condition for them to stay in the church – any more than I've made agreeing with me on this topic a condition for anyone to stay in the church. I'd have encouraged them to stay, and I'd have been praying for them to stay.

Would gay people be allowed on PCC or in other forms of leadership?

There's a legal answer to this, and a pastoral / biblical answer to this. The legal answer is straight-forward – wardens and PCC members are elected by those on the Electoral Roll at the annual meeting. So it's your decision, not mine, if gay people are allowed on PCC.

Would I as pastor be happy with gay people on PCC or in other forms of church leadership? Yes absolutely. I know 3 or 4 people who are gay (although they prefer the term same-sex attracted) and who are celibate who are church pastors. So as I understand it, the Bible doesn't present any bar on people who are attracted to people of the same sex being in church leadership.

But I need to put a little bit of nuance to that because the Bible does talk about the need for those in church leadership to be living holy lives – as an example to the congregation and to outsiders. Now, none of the apostles were perfect, none of us are perfect. This isn't talking about those in church leadership being perfect. But it does mean that we should be calling people who are seeking to live godly lives. If I became aware that a leader within our church was habitually and unrepentantly sinning in a particular way, I would need to have a conversation with that person about it, just as I would expect the Bishop to do that with me if the Bishop became aware that I was sinning habitually and unrepentantly in a particular way.

Now, we can debate about what counts as a leader. I'd say Someone who's ordained? Yes, definitely. Preacher? Yes. Creche leader? Probably not. Cell leader or ministry leader or band leader or PCC member? Yes. Youth leader? Yes. We've never formally written this

down as a policy, but that's roughly what we would work to. So if someone stood for PCC who was habitually and unrepentantly getting drunk or habitually and unrepentantly telling lies or was in an ongoing sexual relationship with someone they weren't married to (in the biblical understanding of marriage as one man, one woman) then the wardens and I would assess the situation and probably discourage that person from standing for election. That's happened in the past.

Why do you think it is inappropriate to pray out same-sex attraction?

OK. This relates back to the **chart we showed** at the beginning of the first session. We were trying to show that there's not just two points of view on the rights and wrongs of gay relationships – there's lots of nuance. I said that I'm at position C on this chart at the moment.

So do I think God planned for some people to have same sex attractions? No.

Do I think being attracted to someone of the same sex is sinful? No – hence why I'm happy to have a celibate gay person in leadership.

Is sex between two same-sex Christians in a loving, monogamous, life-long relationship sinful? My understanding from Scripture is that yes, that is sinful. Hence why I wouldn't be willing to bless such a relationship or have someone like that in leadership. That's what we were looking at last time.

Should Christians with same-sex attractions pursue changing those attractions? Position E on this chart would say definitely yes – because they see even being attracted to someone of the same sex as sinful. So a pastor in that church, because they think it's sinful, will want to pray out same-sex attraction. They may well say it's demonic, and needs to be healed by prayer.

Now, I disagree with that biblically, and I disagree with that pastorally. Biblically, I'd want to draw a clear distinction between temptation and sin. It is not sinful to be tempted. It is sinful to give in to temptation. If I'm tempted to start a sexual relationship with someone who isn't my wife, that's not sinful. If I actually start a sexual relationship with someone who isn't my wife, that definitely would be sinful. Jesus taught us to pray "forgive us our sins" not forgive us our temptations". But we also pray "lead us not into temptation" – because we know that when we're in a position of temptation, it can be very easy to let that turn into sin.

So I would say that being attracted to someone of the same sex is not sinful, therefore that sense of attraction doesn't need to be prayed out.

Pastorally, I disagree with praying out same-sex attraction because it can do great damage. I know of a gay man who stopped coming to this church when they were a teenager because "I didn't want it to be prayed out of me." Now, I don't know whether anyone at the time would have tried to pray it out of him when he was a teenager. I certainly wouldn't be taking that approach now because I think it pushes people away from Christ unnecessarily.

Even though there's been a huge sea-change in the way gay people are accepted in society generally, all the stats would say that gay people, teenagers especially, are far more likely to have poor mental health. What people who are already struggling need is not for someone to home in on their sexual identity but to focus on their spiritual identity – helping them find their sense of worth and identity in Christ.

Similarly, I've heard of a conversation that's happened here in the last few weeks, when someone said or implied that homosexuality needed to be prayed out of people. What they didn't realise was that someone who was listening has attractions to people of the same sex. And the impact of that comment was that the person who experiences same sex attraction felt that church had become an unsafe place for them. That's a tragedy because if church can't be a safe space to deal with these hugely complex issues, then where can? We all need to be speaking and ministering in such a way that creates an environment where people can share their struggles without fear of being pounced on or judged.

Why do you oppose criminalisation of gay relationships?

I'll try to keep this answer much shorter! You may well be aware that Uganda has recently passed some laws further criminalising homosexual practice or promotion. And the Anglican church leaders have been supportive of those bills going through parliament. I think the situation in Ghana is similar, although I don't know where they're up to. Why do I think it's wrong to criminalise gay relationships, and therefore why am I ashamed that Christian leaders in Ghana and Uganda have been supporting those moves?

It's partly an issue of injustice. If a country doesn't criminalise heterosexual sex outside of marriage, it's unjust to pick out homosexual sexual practise.

It's partly because of Jesus' example – remember the woman caught in adultery? She was about to be stoned – ie criminalised. Jesus very deliberately averted that punishment – making it clear that what she'd done was no worse than myriad other sins.

And it's partly because of 1 Corinthians 5.12 where Paul is trying to clarify a misunderstanding from a previous letter he'd written. Previously he'd written, "don't associate with sexually immoral people or the greedy or swindlers or idolators." Now Paul clarifies that he meant don't associate with Christians like that (as a way of disciplining people who are habitually and unrepentantly sinning in those ways), but it's fine to go on associating with non-Christians like that. And he finishes by saying, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside." So I certainly don't think it's for the church to be encouraging legislation on this topic. Let's just concentrate on getting our own house in order! That's hard enough!

Will a diversity of views be allowed in leadership at St James? And in preaching / teaching?

We do already have a diversity of views at St James – on the staff team, on PCC, amongst cell leaders etc. I'm not going to sack anyone for disagreeing with me on this!

The preaching / teaching one feels to me a bit different. One of my roles as pastor is to ensure that this flock is fed and nourished with the truth of God's word. I am accountable before God for that. If someone stands up here on a Sunday and says something which I think is unbiblical or might have serious adverse pastoral consequences, it is part of my job to correct that. I can think of one occasion in the past, years ago, where we had to do that.

Now, I know we've got preachers in this church (yourself included) who I really value as members of our preaching team, who I have learnt much from – but whose interpretation of Scripture is radically different to mine on this topic. That leaves me in a difficult position. How can I let them preach on this topic if, in my view, they're proposing something which is contrary to God's word. I would be accountable before God for letting this flock be fed something which I feel to be harmful, not nutritious.

Now, there will be some issues where I don't think it matters too much if we disagree a bit – but I think this is a bigger issue – not just pastorally, but theologically as well, and we'll talk more about that later. So my current thinking is that I wouldn't allow you or others who take a similar line to you to teach or preach on this topic – but continue to welcome your preaching and teaching on other parts of the Bible. That's difficult for me to say and hard for you to hear, but that's my current thinking. The alternative would be that I let you preach on it, but I then stand up straight after a revisionist sermon and explain why I think it's been wrong. And that would be even more difficult – and it would make our services even longer! – so I figure the simplest thing to do is not invite a revisionist to preach on this topic in the first place.

One little caveat is that to my mind, there's a difference between a public act of worship on a Sunday, and a discussion evening like this. I think there's a particular dimension at work in a public worship service which means I take the proclamation and preaching of God's word in that context very seriously. Of course, I take it seriously in this context too, but it just feels different to me. So in this context, I've been happy for you to present your side of the discussion alongside mine. And we took a similar approach a number of years ago when we had a preacher who took a particular view on creationism that I disagreed with.

Would you allow others to conduct a service of same-sex blessing here?

This ties in a bit to the previous question. Ultimately, all the public acts of worship here are my responsibility, and legally, this building is mine whilst I'm vicar here. So for me to allow a service here which I thought took people further away from God, rather than drawing them closer to him, would be a dereliction of my duties. I'd be accountable to God for that. So because my conviction, from Scripture, is that blessing a same sex relationship would be wrong, I can't allow anyone else to do so in this building whilst I'm incumbent. Similarly, I wouldn't let a blessing of a heterosexual couple take place here where the relationship had begun as an adulterous relationship whilst one or both parties were previously married to other people. For me, that would be asking God to bless a marriage that Jesus says is not right.

Some of you might know that the Methodist Church down the road have been having similar discussions recently. There, the national Methodist church has permitted same-sex marriages. Stephen, the minister, has said like me that he can't in good conscience do that. But he doesn't own that building in the same way that I do this one. So in the Methodist set up, another minister would be called in to conduct the service in that building.

Now, we don't know yet what the final guidelines for the CofE will be – indeed the wording of the prayers of blessings themselves haven't been approved. So what I've said is my understanding at the moment. That might all change in the future.