

On ‘The Body’s Grace’ (1): God’s command

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This is the first part of a planned series on homosexuality and the church. I’m planning to start with a sequence of posts on Rowan Williams’ famous essay, ‘The Body’s Grace’, and then walk slowly towards more ecclesiological matters.

Over on [Faith and Theology](#), when Ben Myers suggested that Rowan Williams’ ‘[The Body’s Grace](#)’, was an example of a life-changing essay, one of the blog’s regular visitors, Shane, [commented](#), ‘What was so great about “The Body’s Grace”? ... I was disappointed by this essay – there is one central question in the debate about homosexuality (whatever one’s answer to it): What does God command me to do? Williams spends the entire essay attempting not to raise that question.’ In a [comment to another post](#), he put the same point again, ‘As far as I’m concerned it’s a straightforward example of why the Anglican church is in the crisis it is in today – Williams is just dodging the central question over and over again. The central question is this: Is homosexuality good, bad or indifferent from God’s perspective?’

Those comments are not the main reason for starting this series of posts, but they do provide a useful starting point – by being exactly wrong.

Williams opens ‘The Body’s Grace’ with the questions, Why does sex matter? and, What does it have to do with God? As he goes on, it becomes clear that he is asking, What on earth do sexual relationships have to do with the Christian gospel?

Albeit in a different theological idiom, Williams is *precisely* asking, What does God command? He is asking, What difference does it make to see sexual relationships in the light of God’s word to the world in Christ? How does seeing sexuality in that light allow us to understand both what can be right about sex, and what can be wrong? How does the gospel enable us to get a truly Christian clarity about sexual ethics?

This strategy is, it seems to me, based on several related assumptions.

1. The gospel – the good news spoken by God to the world in Jesus Christ – *is* God’s command. To put it the other way around, the command of God is not extraneous to the gospel – as if God, while saving us in Christ by the Spirit, said, ‘Oh, and there’s another, unrelated thing I wanted to talk to you about...’
2. The connection between gospel and command is *intelligible*. That is, it is possible for us by attending to the Gospel to understand *how* and *why* we are commanded – and such understanding is the fundamental task of Christian ethics.
3. The gospel so understood provides the criterion by which we discover what truly is a *binding* command upon us. Faced, for instance, with a range of biblical commands about slavery, women, usury, polygamy, and sexual relationships, the fundamental theological question is not, ‘Which of these is culturally conditioned?’ but ‘How, if at all, do these matters relate to the gospel?’ Theological ethics is a matter, we might say, of taking every thought captive to Christ.
4. Because this attention to the gospel is the fundamental task of Christian ethics, any approach that simply stops with the apparent demands we find in Scripture, without asking whether and how they connect to the gospel, fails to take the command of God seriously.
5. If there is some intelligible connection between the gospel and sexual relationships, there would be a binding Christian sexual ethic (a command of God regarding sexual behaviour) even if there were *no* passages in Scripture that explicitly treated sexual matters.

I realise that I have as yet left the term ‘gospel’ vague. But we’re only just getting started...

On ‘The Body’s Grace’ (2): The Gospel

In ‘The Body’s Grace’, I have said, Rowan Williams asks what sex has to do with the Christian gospel. What does sex have to do, that is, with the God of Jesus Christ, and with how this God relates to God’s world?

After the long discussion of incidents from Paul Scott’s *The Raj Quartet* (to which we will be returning, never fear), there are two paragraphs in which Williams begins to show us how his answer to this question is going to work:

The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God’s giving that God’s self makes in the life of the trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this; so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.

The life of the Christian community has as its rationale – if not invariably its practical reality – the task of teaching us this: so ordering our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.

Later on he speaks about

learning about being the object of the causeless loving delight of God, being the object of God’s love for God through incorporation into the community of God’s Spirit and the taking-on of the identify of God’s child

I will have more to say about the *content* of this in due course, but for now I simply want to draw your attention to two aspects of it.

1. This is, for Williams, a fairly straightforward retelling of the Christian gospel – the Christian good news. Anyone who knows his work even moderately well will recognise the familiar outlines of his account of the difficult gospel, costly grace, the free gift that demands everything. You could think of this as a rehearsal of the ‘rule of faith’: a sketch of the basic plot or framework that, as Williams sees it, holds the whole Christian story together. Trinity, creation, incarnation, incorporation into the body of Christ, the work of the Spirit, God’s unearned love, our growth into love – this, according to Williams, is the basic palette of colours from which the Christian picture is painted. Now, rhetorically, Williams assumes that this account of the Gospel is one that his audience will recognise – a bedrock on which he and his audience stand, and on which he can safely build his argument, rather than a platform to which he must hoist them by argument.
2. This brief sketch of the gospel is not, however, simply an identical repetition of Williams’ standard presentation of the Gospel. It is a variation on a theme, or a riff played on a familiar melody. Williams chooses his words, his metaphors, so as to highlight the connections he is about to make to sexuality. Nevertheless, he does not present himself as *importing* those connections, but as drawing them out: the first quote I’ve given above, for instance, continues, ‘It is not surprising that sexual imagery is freely used, in and out of the Bible, for this newness of perception’. The connection to sexuality is already there in the scriptural and traditional material on which this sketch is based.

These two aspects suggest two further reflections:

1. I suspect that, whatever might have been true of the lecture’s original audience, for many readers of this essay the sketch that Williams gives of the Christian message here will not be very familiar. Used to other frameworks for the telling of the Christian story – other plot summaries, in different idioms – those readers will perhaps suspect that this way of expressing the gospel is *driven* by the material on sexual relationships elsewhere in the article. That is, some readers might not recognise that William is anchoring his argument in an account of the gospel that precedes any of his

reflections on sexual ethics – and that his description of sexual ethics is driven by his theology, rather than the other way around.

2. It's important to clear that first point up before moving on to the second, which qualifies it. I'm going to be coming back to this rather more at a later point (if all goes according to plan), but it seems to me that whilst Williams' retelling of the gospel in this context follows the familiar lines of his theology without demur, the precise colour and tone given to that retelling by his wider discussion of sexual ethics *does* show us (and perhaps Williams) that familiar gospel in a new light. In other words, whilst the major movement of the article is to examine sexual relations in the light of the already known gospel, there *is* a minor reverse movement as well: an exploration of the gospel in the light of this investigation of sexual ethics. That's going to prove to be important later on.

One last caveat before I close this post. I don't mean to say that Williams is *right*. I'm not yet asking that question, and when I do I will have some questions to put to him. But – particularly in the current situation – it seems to me that the prior task is to strive for a charitable understanding of *what* Williams is saying, how his argument goes together, what the assumptions are, and so on. So you can expect quite a few more posts simply of exposition before we get to the questioning – but please don't assume that this is intended as hagiography.

On 'The Body's Grace' (3): Sex and sanctification

In the first post in this series, I claimed that Rowan Williams' purpose in 'The Body's grace' was to ask what the connection was between sex and the gospel. In the second post, I pointed to the brief sketch he gives in the lecture of the *content* of that gospel. That gospel, in Williams' view, has to do with the good news that God freely loves us, and that God's love calls us to (and frees us for) love of God. It also has to do with the 'fellowship of Christ's body', in which we learn of God's love for us, and in which we communicate God's love for others.

Asking how sex relates to *this* gospel therefore means two things.

1. Williams' concern is above all with the connection of sex to *sanctification* – to the processes by which people are, by the grace of God, drawn into holiness. Holiness is a matter of being called *out of*, and freed *from*, all that stands against the love of God. It is a matter of being called *to*, and freed *for*, that love. It is a matter of being crucified, and of being raised to new life in Christ. 'Holiness' is, in Williams' theology, a fundamentally dynamic category: to ask about holiness is to ask about whether a particular path leads deeper into the love of God, or leads away. Luther defined sin as a matter of being 'curved in on oneself' (*incurvatus in se*): a matter of being so focused on one's own gain that the gifts of God (and even God Godself) are turned into objects subordinated to that purpose. Holiness is a matter of being untwisted from this sinfulness, and opened up to worship: to an outward-facing delight on God's gifts and on God's self. Williams does not use the language of 'sin' or 'holiness' in the lecture – quite deliberately, I suspect, in view of the fact that it is so easy to assume that we know what these terms mean in the realm of sexuality – but the concepts he uses here to describe sexual relationships are the ones that he elsewhere uses to describe the whole Christian life as a life of growth towards God. 'The Body's Grace' would not, for instance, be out of place as an appendix to Williams' *The Wound of Knowledge*.
2. Williams concern is also fundamentally *ecclesial*. One could say that *the* question of Christian ethics is, 'Does this build up the body?' or 'What makes this body more the body of Christ?' To ask about the connection between sex and the gospel is to ask about the role of sexual relationships in the formation of the body of Christ – that body in which we learn of God's love for us, and communicate God's love for others. One (possibly surprising) way to get a grips with this aspect of Williams' lecture is to notice his talk about *communication* (as when he says, for instance, that 'the moral question ... ought to be one of how much we want our sexual activity to communicate'), and mentally to translate it into Barthian terms. Barth opens his *Church Dogmatics* by saying:

The Church confesses God as it talks about God. It does so first by its existence *in the action of each individual believer*... But as it confesses God the Church also confesses both the humanity and the responsibility of its action. It realises that it is exposed to fierce temptation as it speaks of God, and it realises that it must give an account to God for the way in which it speaks. (CD I/1, p.3, emphasis mine.)

Williams' lecture draws sexuality firmly into this realm: it too is part of that 'action of each individual believer' that 'talks about God'. Williams' question is not simply whether our sexual activity somehow conforms to or obeys the gospel, but whether in our sexual relationships we *proclaim* that gospel.

One of the claims of the lecture is that sex is not a topic we can ignore or treat casually, nor is it an aspect of our lives that we can easily tidy away, or 'get right' and then ignore. And that is not because Williams has bought some post-Freudian picture where *everything* is really about sex, but because he sees that sex is caught up in powerful and complicated ways in these matters of sanctification and proclamation – and those *are* the most serious games in town.

On 'The Body's Grace' (4): Thomas Nagel, handmaid

One of the accusations that is sometimes levelled at 'The Body's Grace' is that Williams, abandoning the sources of properly Christian ethics, turns instead to a secular philosopher, Thomas Nagel, for his inspiration. The lecture, read that way, is a gift to anyone looking for confirmation of a standard caricature of liberal theology: drop God's revealed command because you don't like what it says, and cast around for some man-made substitute that you find palatable. Thankfully, that's not really what's going on here. In fact, if you want confirmation of a standard caricature from this lecture, the one it gets closest to providing is of philosophy as the 'handmaid of theology'.

Williams begins with his already-established theological understanding of the Christian gospel; that's a point I've laboured enough in the earlier parts of this discussion. And he begins with an interest in seeing how sexual relationships might connect to that gospel. He also begins with a sense (to which we will be returning) that the Bible does not actually tell us a great deal about the character of sex itself: what it is, and how sexual relationships work.

What he finds in Thomas Nagel is an attempt to describe as clearly as possible the nature of sexual desire and of sexual activity – an attempt that happens to work in a way that enables Williams to make the connection between sex and the gospel very directly.

Nagel's paper ('Sexual perversion', *Journal of Philosophy* 66.1 (January 1969), republished in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), 39-52) argues against any account of sexual activity that starts by saying 'Sexual desire is simply one of the appetites, like hunger and thirst', and that the different ways of satisfying this appetite should no more trouble us than do the different ways of satisfying hunger and thirst (40). Nagel tries to show that all such accounts are failures, because they simply don't do justice to the specific nature of sexual desire – to its psychological complexity.

He develops his argument by describing a fictional scene between two characters he calls Romeo and Juliet, designed to capture this inherent complexity (45-46). It starts simply enough, but as Nagel adds layer upon layer of description it quickly spirals into intense complexity – but that's the point. He begins with Romeo regarding Juliet with sexual desire, and being aware that he does so; Romeo is aware, to some extent, of this as something taking place in *his* body, and also (very) aware of *her* body). Juliet, it so happens, also regards Romeo with similar sexual desire, and Romeo notices this. Noticing this both sharpens Romeo's desire for Juliet (sharpening his sense of her bodily presence still further), but also makes him aware of *himself* as a bodily object for her desire, and of her as a bodily subject of her *own* desire, not just as an object of *his*

desire. Juliet now notices Romeo's desire for her, and she too finds her desire for him sharpened, and in the same way becomes more aware of him as a subject and herself as object. And, says Nagel, things can get still more complex: Romeo might see that Juliet not only desires him, but that she has seen (and been aroused by) his desire for her – and this itself might further feed his own desire; and similarly Juliet might be aroused not just by Romeo's desire for her, but by the very fact of his arousal at her desire for him. At this point Nagel's conceptual description begins to boil over; as he says, beyond this 'It becomes difficult to state, let alone imagine, further iterations, though they may be logically distinct' – and one might be tempted to think that even this last iteration is pretty difficult to isolate in the actual experience of sexual desire. He continues, however,

Ordinarily, of course, things happen in a less orderly fashion – sometimes in a great rush – but I believe that some version of this overlapping system of distinct sexual perceptions and interactions is the basic framework of any full-fledged sexual relation and that relations involving only part of the complex are significantly incomplete. (46).

What does Williams do with all this? Well, as a first approximation we could say that he takes it at face value – accepting it as Nagel presents it: an attempt at a neutral description of sexual desire, rather than a normative account of what sexual desire *should* be like. Its usefulness rests upon some kind of recognition: yes, that's the sort of thing that happens. Yet Williams finds in Nagel's descriptive account resonates very deeply with his own understanding of sanctification:

All this means, crucially, that in sexual relation I am no longer in charge of what I am. Any genuine experience of desire leaves me in something like this position: I cannot of myself satisfy my wants without distorting or trivialising them. But here we have a particularly intense case of the helplessness of the ego alone. For my body to be the cause of joy, the end of homecoming, for me, it must be there for someone else, be perceived, accepted, nurtured; and that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does it become unreservedly lovable. To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire: my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body. As Blake put it, sexual partners "admire" in each other "the lineaments of gratified desire". We are pleased because we are pleasing.

If Nagel's description is a plausible one, it shows us how sexual relationships can be part of the process by which we are called out of egocentrism and called into community: called into a recognition that our action is not simply the gratification of our own appetites, but is a language that we speak to others – and that it therefore catches us up into webs of responsiveness and responsibility: we have to ask whether we are hearing the other person, and whether we are speaking so as to be heard. What calls us out into this responsiveness and responsibility is the other's desire for and delight in us – as object and as subject; our being called out involves our desire for and delight in our partner – as object and as subject. Sex, if Nagel's description of how it works is a good one, is inherently and unavoidably tangled up with the most basic themes of sanctification.

This is fine as a first approximation – but a second, more precise approximation is possible. Ultimately, it seems to me, Williams does *not* actually accept that Nagel's account is as neutral as he claims. Nagel claims that this is the 'natural' form that sexual relation takes, and (implicitly) that it can be identified as such by any reasonable human being. Yet Williams says that all this ultimately

only makes human sense if we have a language of grace in the first place; and that depends on having a language of creation and redemption. To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned or are learning about being the object of the causeless loving delight of God, being the object of God's love for God through incorporation into the community of God's Spirit and the taking-on of the identity of God's child.

In other words, Williams does not accept that there is a neutral, non-theological, purely philosophical route to the declaration that this form of sexual relationship (rather than something more asymmetrical) is *the*

natural paradigm against which all sexual relationships can be judged. He privileges this description of sexual relations *on theological grounds*.

That in turn means that he can broaden the focus of his account much more easily than can Nagel from individual sexual encounters to ongoing patterns of relationship, and to the questions of faithfulness and commitment that they raise. It may be difficult to see how to get directly to those questions simply from a phenomenological account of how sexual desire happens to work: could we really claim in some neutral sense that a long-term, faithfully committed relationship is the 'natural' outworking of the patterns of mutual desire that Nagel describes? Yet as soon as Nagel's account has been given its fuller theological grounding within an account of sanctification, the connections follow easily.

This theological recontextualisation of Nagel's ideas also means that Williams can include a much greater sense of the fragility and difficulty of this kind of sexual relationship: a sense, perhaps, that far from this being the 'basic framework of any full-fledged sexual relation', as Nagel puts it, it is seldom realised in actual sexual relations in anything like the symmetrical and complete form that Nagel describes.

In other words, Nagel's account provides a stepping stone – and not the first or the last – in the development of Williams' account. It helps him to articulate his sense of how sex is (or can be) caught up in sanctification, and so of how it can be (and often is) caught up in its opposite. Nagel does not act as an *authority* for Williams: the structure of Williams' argument cannot at all be reduced to the claim that certain kinds of sexual relation are okay because Nagel says so, or wrong because Nagel says so. No; Nagel acts as handmaid, and only as a handmaid, providing conceptual tools that Williams borrows, and bends to his own use.

On 'The Body's Grace' (5): Black, white and grey

So, where have we got to so far? Well, one way of summarising what I have said so far is to say that, for Williams – *it's all about love*. Sex matters because it is deeply bound up with love. Sex is good when it builds up love. Sex is bad when it works against love. It's that simple.

Simple? Well, yes – as long as we are willing to pay attention to two big difficulties.

1. We are *very* good at misunderstanding 'love'. The real nature of love is something we are taught (painfully and slowly) by the gospel: by God's love winning us gradually away from the distortions we have taken for love, and winning us into Christlike love. That's why I've delayed focusing on the language of love until now, and instead spent my time talking about the gospel, and about sanctification – in the (no doubt vain) hope that readers will recognise that by 'love' I mean something you learn on the way of the cross, not something you learn by watching romantic comedies. And this creates a real pastoral problem: how on earth do you *say*, 'It is all about love!' without people *hearing*, 'It's all about how you feel!'
2. Perhaps *the* strongest message of 'The Body's Grace' is that the connection between sex and love is deeply fraught. It is messy, complicated, and risky – and it is hugely tempting for us to fall into deeply misleading platitudes of one kind or another (and, as we will see, Williams wants us to avoid liberal platitudes just as much as conservative platitudes). And that has important implications for the kind of moral clarity one might expect in this area. It is possible to be extremely clear about what 'good' and 'bad' mean in this context, and about why the good is good and the bad is bad. But that doesn't mean that the job of discovering where on the ground the good and the bad are actually to be found is going to be at all easy. (Think of a analogous example: suppose I were advocating an ethical position that said: what really matters is whether you do x out of selfish or out of selfless motivations. That is, on the face of it, a very clear distinction; there's real moral clarity there. But that doesn't for a moment mean that the job of examining one's motivations, and of discerning whether one is being selfish or selfless, is easy.)

Put it this way. Conceptually, what I have been discussing so far is Williams' description of what is

black and what is white in sexual relationships. Building up love? Good. Undermining love? Bad. How much more black and white a description do you want? But, when Williams talks about the actual existence of sexual relationships in the world, things are not so neat. Of course, there are some kinds of sexual activity that he is, using these paint pots, happy to colour exclusively black: rape, paedophilia, and so on. And the analysis he has given of the connection between sex and the gospel enables him to give an account of *why* rape, say, is always and only wrong. But far from finding that outside these blackspots everything is white, he finds elsewhere only differing shades of grey. There's no place on the map of real sexual relationships where we can simply breathe a sigh of relief and know for certain that we are *safe*. Sex is *always* more complicated, and more risky than that.

On 'The Body's Grace' (6): Not legalist but rigorist?

One of Williams' targets in 'The Body's Grace' is an attitude that we might hesitantly label 'legalism': the attitude that says that as long as we stick to the rules, we're absolved of all further enquiry – the kind of legalism that would say, for instance, that sex within marriage is right, and sex outside marriage is wrong, and that *that is all that needs to be said*.

Yet the primary note that Williams sounds in his criticism of such legalism is not that it is too restrictive, but that it is altogether too permissive. A legally constituted heterosexual marriage, for instance, could well be the context within which a deeply broken form of sexual relationship grows – one in which, say, the wife is simply treated as the sexual property of the husband – and the very fact of the marriage's legality might well make that abuse harder to identify and call to account. Indeed, such brokenness might, in some cultural contexts, be *built in* to the nature of marriage: one of the most controversial sentences in the lecture is not about homosexuality, but about heterosexuality:

Incidentally, if this suggests that, in a great many cultural settings, the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse is a "perversion" – well, that is a perfectly serious suggestion...

The problem with the legalism that contents itself with asking whether a sexual relationship is on the right or wrong side of the boundary is, as Williams sees it, that

The question of human meaning is not raised, we are not helped to see what part sexuality plays in our learning to be human with one another, to enter the body's grace, because all we need to know is that sexual activity is licensed in one context and in no other. (Emphasis mine)

To give a more trivial example which might help illuminate this, consider driving. Some drivers think that being a good, responsible driver is defined by obeying the Highway Code. I'm driving up to a T-junction, and see that another car is driving along the road that I'm about to reach. I know that, according to the code, I have to give way, so I stop. I'm a good driver, and know how long it takes me to stop, so I let myself drive up to the junction fast before pushing the break down hard and stopping dead just behind the white line. I've obeyed the code, to the letter – but I have ignored what my behaviour *communicates*, how it will be *read* – and the other car swerves so as to avoid what it thinks I am about to do. To be a good driver, one must know the code, certainly – but if 'the question of human meaning is not raised', one has not gone far enough: one must also recognise that one's driving speaks a language, and take pains over what one speaks in that language.

Characteristically, one of the central insistences of Williams' lecture is that we should not let ourselves off the hook too easily. 'Getting it right' is not so easy. Legalism does not go far enough, if the question of human meaning is not raised: our sexual activity speaks a language, and we must ask what story it is telling.

I do find myself with a question, at this point. This refusal to allow that there is an easy space in which sexual relationships are simply fine, and can be exempted from further ethical scrutiny, is clearly hugely important – and I hope it is obvious why that is so. Yet I am left with the beginnings of a question that we're

going to be coming back to, about the *location* of the kind of theological and ethical scrutiny that Williams is suggesting. After all, one way of reading the lecture (a misleading way, I think) would be to see it as advocating some kind of anxious self-scrutiny, a refusal to lose oneself in the rhythm and dynamic of sexual activity because one is always mentally standing to one side, trying to see how one's actions might be read. It could all too easily be read as advocating some kind of heroic moral agonising about sex – one that has little connection with the deeply unheroic ordinariness of good sexual relationships – the fun, the tenderness, the pleasure of it all. I'm reminded of a truly disastrous piece of relationships advice that I was once given: Don't ever act in such a way that you would be unhappy for Jesus to be in the same room.

I don't think this *is* what Williams' is advocating, but it is certainly the case that his lecture is a world away from any kind of lazily permissive attitude: there's no such thing as entirely safe sex, for Williams. In the next part, however, I want to look at how this refusal to let us off the hook – what one might call the rigorist trajectory in his argument – is balanced by his attention to the surprising sexual places where grace might be found.

On 'The Body's Grace' (7): Light in the darkness

Sorry to have been so slow recently: I've been distracted by a combination of going on holiday and finally getting some concentrated research time (and so getting absorbed in questions completely unconnected to this series of posts).

Where had we got to? Well, Williams has defined what is good about sex, in the light of his understanding of the Christian gospel – arguing that sex can indeed be part of God's sanctifying work (so sex does *matter*). In the light of that, he has also defined what can be *bad* about sex: how it can work against the Gospel. Yet, despite the clarity with which he identifies the good and the bad, we have seen Williams acknowledge that actual sexual relationships are nearly always *mixed*. Last time, I discussed his insistence that marriage – or any legal framework within which a sexual relationship might be generically defined as 'proper' – is not enough to *guarantee* the good of sex. Such frameworks do not let us off the hook.

However, if Williams insists that the sexual relationships that the church has habitually thought of as 'permitted' might still be contexts for (and sometimes guarantees of) bad sex, he also insists that there can be good to be found on the other side of those boundaries. There might be ways in which sexual relationships that the church has habitually regarded as inappropriate might nevertheless be contexts for the good of sex.

That's the point, after all, of the long re-description of events from Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* at the start of the lecture. Williams finds there a powerful and convincing portrait of a particular sexual relationship, enmeshed in its larger psychological, social, and political context. He finds a portrait, in fact, of a pretty dark relationship: one which clearly has very little about it that speaks of the good of the Gospel. And yet he finds that, in the portrayal of that particular relationship, there is a faint glimmer of the real good of sex, a glimmer that refuses to be blinked away. The 'relationship' is in many ways a repulsive one – go read the novel, you'll see what I mean – and Williams doesn't suggest that it is somehow as a whole redeemed by the fact of this faint glimmer. Nevertheless, it is not *all* bad, not quite pitch dark through and through.

If the Church's vision of sex is defined by the Gospel, such that it allows the Gospel to tell it what is good about sex, then it is put in a position where it might – where it must – recognise glints and gleams of good even in some sexual relationships that are genuinely and properly objectionable. To suggest that everything on the wrong side of the boundaries that the church draws is *entirely and only* wrong, so that no good at all can come of it, is a betrayal of the primary criterion by which Christians are called to identify the good.

There are several clarifications to make at this point

1. This is not to say that *all* bad sex will have something of the good about it. Williams' deliberately examines one very specific sexual relationship – and whilst the *attentiveness* that he demonstrates

can and should be generalised to other relationships, *what he finds* cannot. This is not a facile sexual version of the claim that ‘There’s a little bit of good in everyone, you know.’

2. Williams is not allowing his ethics to be dictated by Paul Scott, as some have suggested. As a first approximation you could say that he simply uses the novel as an illustration of a point established on quite other grounds. More accurately, one could say that he finds in the novel an enigmatic hint (Scott’s delineation of Sarah’s entry into her ‘body’s grace’), and asks what if anything he can make of it in the light of the gospel. Scott plays a role not entirely dissimilar to that played by Nagel.
3. More accurately still, we could say that the use of the novel ends up being deeply fitting. Williams suggests that discovery of the patterns of good and harm in a sexual relationship requires a sustained and insightful attentiveness to the complex psychological, social, political reality of a relationship. His ethic requires, one might say, a novelistic level of attentiveness.
4. The discovery of light in the darkness does not mean that the church will make no rules, have no policies, draw no boundaries. Williams does not say, for instance, that the church will stop insisting on faithfulness as the proper form of a sexual relationship (that’s something we will be coming back to). But it does mean that the church will have to operate its policies, police its boundaries, in the recognition that (a) it does not thereby create a sterilised environment within which everything is okay, and that (b) it does not thereby erect a fence beyond which everything is bad and only bad.
5. Lastly, the bit of the argument I have been examining in this post *not* – absolutely not – secretly about homosexuality. Williams’ quite separate argument about homosexuality (which we have not yet come to) is very different. So he does *not* – absolutely not – argue that despite the real problems with such relationships, there is nevertheless a gleam of good, strong enough to suggest that the church should bless them anyway. His argument about homosexuality is *not* that the church should shift where precisely on the gospel-driven gradient from acceptable to unacceptable it draws its line, so as to take in a broader territory. Those who disagree with Williams on homosexuality can afford to take the present part of his argument seriously, without worrying that they are thereby leaving open the door through which he will bring same-sex relationships.

On ‘The Body’s Grace’ (8): Love, faithfulness, faith

It seems to me that there are two rather different ways in which one might take the argument of my previous section – the argument that it is sometimes possible, with the spectacles that the Gospel provides, to see gleams of good even in some quite lightless sexual relationships or encounters.

- On the one hand, some will probably take this to be an instruction to look for such gleams and then simply to *celebrate* them, as if Williams were saying, ‘Look – even in that dreadful encounter that Sarah Layton has, she discovers the body’s grace. *How wonderful.*’
- On the other hand, it seems to me that Williams’ lecture leaves the attentive church not so much with the task of celebrating as with the task of *calling*: the task of pointing people who might have some partial or limited experience of the good of sex (people inside and outside the church) in the direction of the fullness of that good.

There are three ways in which Williams’ lecture specifies the nature of the call that the church will issue.

1. The first of these is the most generic, and it is the call we have been exploring all along. As I have repeatedly said, Williams’ strategy rests on identifying what is good about sex – what good sex (good in Gospel terms, that is) really looks like. If I may risk some shorthand, relying upon what I have said in earlier posts to give the fuller content: this is a call to *loving mutuality*, a call to what Williams has been calling ‘the body’s grace’. So the first way in which the church issues a call to the fullness of the good of sex is simply by holding up such a picture of good sex. (Don’t take that recommendation too literally, or your church *will* make it onto the television news.)

2. Second, though, the call that the church issues will be a call to *faithfulness*. Faithfulness is, says Williams, a ‘context in which grace can abound’: and so the church will call people to ‘unconditional public commitments’, and will ‘bless sexual unions’ in order to help

give them a life, a reality, not dependent on the contingent thoughts and feelings of the people involved ... so that they might have a certain freedom to ‘take time’, to mature and become as profoundly nurturing as they can.... [T]he promise of faithfulness, the giving of unlimited time to each other, remains central for an understanding the full ‘resourcefulness’ and grace of sexual union.

Here, it seems, the ‘gradient’ from darkness to light – from sexual relationships devoid of grace to those bathed in grace – has a significant ‘step’ in it: the existence of unconditional public commitment does mark a significant boundary on that gradient, and it is the church’s job to maintain that boundary, and to issue a clear call to people to the good that is to be found beyond it – and, yes, a critique of what lies outside it (Williams speaks of the need to ‘identify certain patterns as sterile, undeveloped or even corrupt’).

And yet, in line with all that I have been saying in the last two posts, Williams makes it clear that the maintenance of this boundary does not in and of itself ensure that everything within it is ‘good’ (it does not let us off the hook), and he also makes it clear that the church has no business (if it abides by the gospel criteria it has been given) declaring that *everything* outside that boundary is simply and only bad. As Williams says, ‘an absolute declaration that every sexual partnership must conform to the pattern of commitment or else have the nature of sin *and nothing else* is unreal and silly.’ (My emphasis) (That sentence needs careful parsing. In particular, don’t read the ‘must’ without carrying on to the ‘or else’. That is, don’t think that Williams is saying that it is silly for the church to issue a clear and consistent call to faithfulness. Rather, he is saying that when the church does so – and does so without ‘weakening or compromising’ – it should at the same time recognise that the people it is calling might nevertheless have experienced limited but genuine goods in sexual relationships that don’t conform to that call.)

3. Beyond the first call (the call to loving mutuality) and the second call (the call to faithfulness), there is a third call in Williams’ lecture – and it is the most radical.

[T]he body’s grace itself only makes sense if we have a language of grace in the first place; and that depends on having a language of creation and redemption. To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify *most clearly and hopefully* if we have also learned or are learning about being the object of the causeless loving delight of God. (Emphasis mine.)

In other words, the third call is a call to *faith*, because the good of sex can be most clearly and hopefully identified within the life of faith. And yes, that does mean that to get the most out of sex, you have to be a Christian... More soberly put, when it comes to sexual relationships, the deepest call that the church issues is a call to *conversion*.

It is here, incidentally, that Williams places his analysis of the call to celibacy – and the lesson that Christian celibates have to teach us. Devoted to learning about ‘being the object of the causeless loving delight of God’, they are directly concerned with, and are living signs of, the deepest context that makes sense of sexual relationships. They are, precisely as celibate, connected to sexuality’s deepest meaning – and they remind those of us who are not called to celibacy of that deepest meaning. ‘[P]aradoxical as it sounds, the celibate calling has, as one aspect of its role in the Christian community, the nourishing and enlarging of Christian sexuality.’)

On ‘The Body’s Grace’ (9): Homosexuality

First of all, it is important to note that the purpose of Rowan Williams’ lecture was to sketch a Christian theology of sexuality *in general* – i.e., an account that can say something about *any and all* sexual relationships or encounters. It is only towards the end of his development of such a general account that he asks whether this sketch has anything to say about the specific issue of homosexuality.

I don't say this in order to brush what he says aside, or in order to insulate it from scrutiny, but simply because I think this ordering matters. Williams does not try to sketch a theology of homosexuality, and then use that to shape what he says about sexuality in general. He works the other way round.

The next thing to note is that the question Williams addresses in detail in the lecture is *not*, 'Are same-sex sexual relationships legitimate?' Rather, he asks why it is that the question of same-sex relationships produces such 'massive cultural and religious anxiety'. That's the *only* question regarding homosexuality that he tackles directly, the only one where he shows us how his general sketch of a theology of sexuality might have something to say about homosexuality. The wider question of the legitimacy of same-sex sexual relationships only becomes his *explicit* focus of attention in passing, and we will have to do some work to understand what the lecture implies for that wider question.

The third thing to note is that it is quite possible to find the answer that Williams offers to this specific question less than convincing, without that affecting one's opinion of the general theology of sexuality from which it is drawn. I offer myself as a case in point. Williams' tentative answer to the question about 'massive cultural and religious anxiety' (and it *is* framed tentatively) is that same-sex relationships get us so worked up because they 'oblige us to think *directly* about bodiliness and sexuality in a way that socially and religiously sanctioned heterosexual unions don't.' When we are thinking about those socially and religiously sanctioned unions, we can tie questions about what sex is *for* – what the *good* of sex is – to questions about the production of children. That procreational context can allow us to avoid thinking about sexual relationships in and of themselves (the 'inner logic and process of the sexual relation itself', as Williams puts it). Same-sex sexual relationships might be hard for us to think about clearly and calmly, he suggests, precisely because they force us to ask what there is to sex outside the context of procreation.

My own reaction? On this specific point, I don't get much beyond a rather sceptical, 'Well, maybe...'. I rather suspect that Williams is all too aware now that the sources of our anxiety on this question are more varied and more tangled than this – though this may indeed be one of the deep currents.

Nevertheless, although I find the basic claim somewhat implausible, I don't have any problems with where Williams goes next. He moves on to note that there are strong biblical roots for a non-procreation-centred understanding of the good of sex. The way that the Bible uses marital and sexual imagery to talk about God's relationship to Israel, or Christ's relationship to the church; the way Jesus and Paul discuss marriage without placing procreation central to what they say – all these lead Williams to say that 'if we are looking for a sexual ethic that can be seriously informed by the Bible, there is a good deal to steer us away from assuming that reproductive sex is a norm, however important and theologically significant it might be.' He notes that this point should be uncontroversial in a church that has accepted the legitimacy of contraception – and I think that's probably a little optimistic, but true in principle.

Then comes the controversial bit.

In fact, of course, in a church which accepts the legitimacy of contraception, the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts, or on a problematic and non-scriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures.

This is, in context, quite clearly a throw-away comment to an audience who could be expected to agree. Williams does not *argue* for it, nor does he expect to have to. Nor does he stop to give any precision or clarity to what he means. It's not what the lecture is about.

Nevertheless, I think it is possible to discern an unstated argument that must underlie what Williams says here – an argument that *does* connect to the rest of the lecture. I think the *form* of the comment that I have quoted only makes sense if Williams *can see nothing inherent in the nature of a same-sex sexual relationship which would automatically place it somewhere specific on the gradient from darkness to light – from bad to good sex – that he has been describing*. That is, the comment suggests that Williams can see

nothing that would automatically make a same-sex sexual relationship less (or more) capable than a heterosexual one of proclaiming the gospel, nothing that would make it less or more capable of answering the call to loving mutuality, nothing that would make it less or more capable of answering the call to faithfulness, nothing that would make it less or more capable of answering the call to faith. If he's right about the nature of the good of sex – if sexual relationships really are fundamentally about the production not of children but of 'embodied person[s] aware of grace' – why should it matter what sex the partners are?

Except, of course, that plenty of people think that it *does* matter, and matters a great deal. And they are unlikely to be satisfied by the extraordinarily brief treatment that their objections receive in this comment. I've not got much to say, I'll admit, about Williams' rejection of the 'natural complementarity' argument. (At it's crudest, he's thinking of the claim that a moment's reflection on human plumbing will tell you that same-sex sexual relationships are obviously wrong – but he also probably has in mind somewhat more sophisticated arguments that try to start with the basic facts of human biology, and argue up to the claim that sex is naturally only proper to heterosexual pairings.) I don't recall any place where he talks about this in more detail, and in any case it does not seem to be at the centre of the Anglican church's disagreements about this matter, so I'll leave it on one side.

There's much more to say, however, on the other branch of Williams' comment – and so it is to his handling of the Bible that I turn in the next post.

On 'The Body's Grace' (10): Biblical Foundations

So, what roles does the Bible play in all this?

1. The first thing to say, I think, is that the throwaway comment I quoted last time (about a 'fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts') may have been enough in the context in which the lecture was originally delivered, but was bound to sound decidedly inadequate and dismissive once the lecture migrated beyond that context. Here more than anywhere else we need to supplement 'The Body's Grace' with some of Williams' other writings.
2. Next, it's important to realise the primary biblical groundings for the account of sexuality that we have been exploring are not any collection of biblical texts about sexuality; they are texts about the good news of Jesus Christ, the love of God, the demands of discipleship. So, if you want to probe the scriptural roots of Williams' vision, go and read the biblical chapters of *The Wound of Knowledge*, read *Resurrection*, read *Christ on Trial*, and so on: *that's* where you'll find the biblical roots of this vision of sexuality.
3. The advice in the previous point makes sense because, as Williams put it in a 1996 sermon,

there *isn't* really very much in the way of what we should think of as sexual ethics in the New Testament. There are meditations and recommendations to do with marriage, and there are some stark observations about celibacy; there are a few scattered remarks about vaguely defined 'impurity' or 'uncleanness' of behaviour, *porneia*, which seems to refer to anything from adultery to prostitution; there are, in the writings ascribed to St Paul, three disparaging references to sexual activity between men. Jesus is recorded as following a strict line on the admissibility of a man deciding to dissolve his marriage (not exactly a discussion of divorce in the modern sense), and refers in passing to *porneia* as one of the evils that come from the inner core of the self. And that's about it. The overall impression is certainly that sexual activity is an area of moral risk, and that nothing outside marriage is to be commended. But it is, when you look at the texts, surprisingly difficult to find this spelled out in any detail, explored or defended.

If we therefore, in the words of another of his sermons,

want to know whether Christian discipleship makes identifiable claims on this vast and complex area of experience; whether sexuality is an area where you need thought, judgment, discrimination, and, if it is, whether the gospel is of any use in forming your thought and discrimination

– well, we’re going to need to set the Bible’s limited explicit teaching on sexual ethics within the context of its broader teaching on the Christian life, and ask what connections there are between sexuality and discipleship. (Although we should first, perhaps, recognise the significance of the difficulty: ‘We come to the New Testament eagerly looking for answers, and we meet a blank or quizzical face: why is *that* the all-important problem?’)

[The first and third quotes are from ‘Forbidden Fruit’, a sermon delivered at Christ’s College, Cambridge in 1996, printed in Martyn Percy (ed.), *Intimate Affairs: Sexuality and Spirituality in Perspective* (London: DLT, 1997), pp.21–31: pp 23, 26; the second is from an undated sermon, ‘Is there a Christian Sexual Ethic?’ in Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgment: Sermons and Addresses* (London: DLT, 1994), 161–167: p.161.]

4. Looking more directly at the material on sexuality that we *do* find in the Bible, there are various other general comments Williams makes. For instance, there’s the material I’ve already discussed: Williams believes that

if we are looking for a sexual ethic that can be seriously informed by our Bible, there is a good deal to steer us away from assuming that *reproductive* sex is a norm, however important and theologically significant it may be. (Emphasis mine).

We are not going to arrive at a Christian sexual ethic primarily by focusing on the proper conditions for procreation.

5. More positively, in a reflection on 1 Corinthians 6, Williams insists that

my policy about sexual behaviour isn’t just my business: it is part of that vast and obscure network that gives us our new being as Christians, our being-for-each-other in the Church. *The community thus has an interest in what I decide about sex.* Not a prurient and gossipy interest; and not that (God forbid) it should be instituting inquisitions into sexual behaviour; but it has a legitimate claim to put before believers their responsibility to the whole body, and thus to ask that sexual commitments be open, a proper public matter, supported by the community and in turn nourishing the life of the community. (‘Forbidden Fruit’, p.29; emphasis mine)

6. Then there are all the hints that Williams finds of a positive vision of sexuality connected to the life of God and the life of discipleship. He finds in 1 Corinthians 7 an image

in which partners *renounce* the idea that they have rights to be exercised at each other’s expense, and are able to entrust themselves to the care of another. My *right* is to be honoured, not coerced, by my partner, but I can only express that by allowing that my own ‘power’ in this relationship is given purely for the purpose of returning the same honour. Neither is free *from* the other; each is free *for* the other. (‘Forbidden Fruit’, p.27)

(In ‘The Body’s Grace’, he suggests that this passage implies ‘a more remarkable revaluation of sexuality than anything else in the Christian Scriptures.’) He finds Ephesians 5 making a connection between sexuality and ‘the way God in Christ deals with us: by self-gift and self-sacrifice’, and reflects that

Christians are meant to reflect the form and style of divine action in all they do; sexual activity is no exception. If God acts for us by letting go of a divine power that is abstract and unilateral and comes in Jesus’ life to set us free for working with Jesus and praying with Jesus, this suggests strongly that a sexual partnership that is unequal, that represents power exercised by one person trying to define the other, would fail to be part of an integrated Christian life. (Ibid, p.28)

In other words, the kind of vision Williams has been sketching of a Christian sexual ethic *is* one that he finds adumbrated in some of the New Testament's passages about marriage.

It is in the context of all this – and *only* in the context of all this – that we can turn and ask what Williams makes of the passages he was referring to in the quote I gave in point 1. So, in the next post, I'm going to look at what Williams does with Romans 1.

On 'The Body's Grace' (11): Reading Romans 1

'The Body's Grace' itself contains no discussion of the biblical passages that explicitly address same-sex relationships, but we can go some way to plugging that gap by turning to another piece by Williams: 'Knowing myself in Christ' in *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, ed. Timothy Bradshaw (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 12-19 – one of a set of responses to 'The St Andrew's Day Statement' – which is available as an rtf document [here](#).

The portion of the paper that concerns us begins when Williams poses the question,

Is [homosexual desire] always and necessarily a desire comparable to the desire for many sexual partners or for sexual gratification at someone else's expense – comparable, more broadly, to the desire for revenge or the desire to avoid speaking an unwelcome or disadvantageous truth? (14)

He suggests that the St Andrew's statement answers this question in the affirmative, and that it does so in large part on the basis of Romans 1 – specifically Romans 1:26-27.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

He then draws attention to the fact that same-sex relationships or practices are described here as involving

the blind abandonment of what is natural and at some level known to be so, and the deliberate turning in rapacity to others. (16)

I take it that the first part of this statement connects Romans 1:26-27 to verses 19-25 ('For what can be known about God is plain to them ... [but] ... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator'), and that the second part of the statement relates verses 26 and 27 to what comes after in 29 to 31 ('They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.')

Williams then claims that it is 'quite possible' to ask whether the desires, relationships and activities condemned by Romans 1:26-27 include everything that we now know as homosexuality.

Is it not a fair question to ask whether conscious rebellion and indiscriminate rapacity could be presented as a plausible account of the essence of 'homosexual behaviour', let alone homosexual desire as it may be observed around us now? (16)

Williams asks what happens if, as we ask this question, we are faced with phenomena that seem to match one part of this description (in that they involve same-sex desire and sexual activity) but do not match the rest. He imagines us confronted with a homosexual person who says

I want to live in obedience to God; I truly, prayerfully and conscientiously do not recognise Romans 1 as describing what I am or what I want. I am not rejecting something I know in the depths of my being. I struggle against the many inducements to live in promiscuous rapacity – not without cost.

It is vital to note that he is not asking us to imagine someone who does not like the harsh truth that the passage is proclaiming, or who regards it as unfair. This is not about disagreeing with the passage; it is about claiming that there are forms of homosexuality that are *simply not imagined* by this passage – forms which its descriptions do not capture, and which its condemnations therefore do not reach.

He then imagines the person going on to say

I am not asking just for fulfilment. I want to know how my human and historical being, enacting itself through the negotiation of all sorts of varied desires and projects, may become transparent to Jesus, a sign of the kingdom. I do not seek to avoid cost. But for the married, that cost is worked out in the daily discipline of a shared life, which, by the mutual commitment it embodies, becomes a means of grace and strength for the bearing of the cost.

Williams asks,

How does the homosexually inclined person show Christ to the world? That must be the fundamental question.

If the homosexuality of Romans 1:26-27 is condemned because, ultimately, it cannot but be a betrayal of the God of Jesus Christ – a setting up of idols in the place of that God – then Williams' claim is not simply the negative one that there are forms of homosexual relationship not captured by that critique, but the positive one that there are forms of homosexual relationship capable of witnessing to that same God. We are back to the claim implied by 'The Body's Grace', which I discussed two posts ago: Williams can see nothing that would automatically make a same-sex sexual relationship less capable than a heterosexual one of proclaiming the gospel.

* * *

Now, this is as it stands no more than the sketch of an argument, but I think it is possible to see how it might be filled in. So I offer you here a more detailed Williams-ish reading of the Romans passage. I am making this up; I have not cribbed it from anywhere in Williams' writings – nevertheless, it is my attempt to imagine a more detailed account consistent with Williams' arguments.

In the first place, it is clear that Romans 1:26-27 does not simply describe homosexuality as one more vice in a list of vices. It is presented as a vice which, along with idolatry, somehow cuts to the heart of what sin is like. Verses 19-25 describe the loss of a right ordering of life – a life centred upon true worship. Romans 1:26-27 suggest that this right ordering is also, perhaps fundamentally, a right ordering of *desire*, an ordering centred upon God, but within which there is a place for proper ('natural') sexual relationships. Sexual relationships *matter* in this ordering, and receive such prominent billing in the story of its destruction, because they are one of the key places where the ordering of our desires is writ large.

Sin fundamentally involves the breakdown of this proper ordering, and so although it will have many symptoms, the disordering of specifically sexual desire will loom large amongst those symptoms – it will, in some sense, be (along with explicit idolatry) *the* characteristic sin.

But – and this is crucial – the passage also goes on to describe in more general terms the character of disordered life: it is malice, covetousness, envy, it is haughty, boastful, proud. Recalling another famous Pauline passage, one might say that disordered life is fundamentally life devoid of that Christlike love which is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It *only* makes sense for Paul to put a description of homosexual desire in the centre of this passage if, for him, homosexual desire unlike heterosexual desire *automatically* means a form of sexual desire in which the individual's gratification has become the central, the all-consuming element – if, for him, homosexual desire *automatically* means a form of sexual desire which by its very nature is incapable of the kind of loving mutuality that we have been discussing all along. If that is not what Paul is assuming, his argument makes

no sense. (Of course, it might not be too difficult to see how the most visible forms of homosexual relationship in Paul's context may well in his eyes have confirmed that supposition).

To say that, nevertheless, we have learnt that there are other forms of homosexuality – that there are forms unimagined by Paul which can, as easily as heterosexuality, answer the calls to loving mutuality, to committed faithfulness, and to faith that I have discussed earlier – is not to deny the fundamental thrust of the passage. It does not deny that sin is fundamentally characterised by rebellion against God and by rapacity, that sexual relationships are one place in which that disorder is particularly clearly displayed, and that it is understandable that Paul in his context should single out the forms of homosexual relationships he knew of as particularly clear and dramatic examples of that. It can affirm all that, and yet say 'Nevertheless...'

* * *

There is one fly in this ointment, however, and Williams acknowledges it towards the end of his paper as a point on which further discussion is needed (19). This argument has not yet touched upon one aspect of the passage which might seem to undercut (or at least to complicate) the reading I have just given. The disorder of sexual desire described in Romans 1 is presented as an abandonment of *natural* desire – and the assumption is clearly that heterosexual desire is natural in a way that homosexual desire is not and cannot be. (We're clearly not a million miles away from the 'God made Adam and *Eve*, not Adam and *Steve*' argument...)

My instinct, at this point, is simply to say that, yes, the discovery that there are forms of homosexual relationship that are not rapacious in the way Paul assumes is *also* the discovery that there are forms of homosexual relationship that are just as *natural* as heterosexuality can be. And that this recognition, strange though it may sound, is a profoundly important one: it helps us realise that 'natural' does not for Christians mean anything different than 'capable of proclaiming Christ; capable of displaying Christlike love'. It helps us take the 'natural'/unnatural' distinction captive to Christ, and recognise that it is precisely the same as the distinction between the sense in which the world to which the incarnate Word came was his own, and the sense in which it did not recognise him. And, yes, I don't deny for a moment that this goes beyond what is envisaged in this particular passage – but I would argue that to take the passage in this direction is profoundly in line with the gospel as a whole.

I know that this will sound to some like I'm not taking the passage seriously. But I think most of those who reject this position will actually play just as loose with its words. That is, I suspect that most of those who say that Romans 1 teaches us that homosexual sexual relationships are wrong because they violate the natural male-female ordering of creation will go on to downplay the equally clear implication of the passage that such homosexual relationships are inherently and obviously incapable of anything other than rapacity, that they are inherently and obviously incapable of loving mutuality, that they are inherently and obviously incapable of sustaining anything other than gratification. And yet such downplaying is going to be unavoidable if, following the insistence of Lambeth 98's resolution 1.10, we 'listen to the experience of homosexual persons' as Williams has suggested we should. In the light of that listening, I don't think there's *any* way forward with this passage that doesn't involve going beyond it in some way.

* * *

You still disagree. I can tell.

In the remaining sections of this series, I'm going to ask where that disagreement leaves us.

On 'The Body's Grace' (12): Sex and the church

There's an important question hovering in the background that I have not yet asked. *Why am I bothering with all this?* This is, after all, now my twelfth blog post on a single article by Rowan Williams, and you may well be wondering why on earth I have taken the time to walk through it so slowly – and so laboriously.

Part of the answer, of course, is that I'm an anally retentive academic. Yes, I'm afraid it's true. I like trying to set things out in order, all the edges lined up. I like my books in alphabetical order and experience physical pain when they are disarranged. And I like dotting the i's and crossing the t's when expounding someone else's ideas.

But there is more to it than that, I promise. You see, with all this clotted verbiage I've been trying to *model* something. I have been trying to show how one might give a charitable reading of Williams' lecture, and one that is charitable in a very specific sense: I have been asking, as seriously as I know how, whether the lecture is a serious attempt at *obedience to the gospel*. As I'll explain in a moment, I think there's something quite important about such charitable looking for obedience in another's position.

'Obedience to the gospel' is, however, a surprisingly difficult idea to get at. It's difficult because, of course, there is in Rowan Williams' work (as in that of any other theologian) a particular construal of what 'gospel' means, and so a particular construal of what obedience to that Gospel involves. So there's a difference between asking whether, in *Williams' own terms*, he is trying to be obedient to the gospel, and asking whether he is trying to be so in *my terms*. Yet if I contented myself with asking whether Williams' understanding of the gospel, and of the nature of obedience to that gospel, agrees with mine, I would be insulating myself against any deep challenge or insight that his understanding may have to offer to me: I would be declaring in advance that I am right, that anyone who differs is wrong, and that I am not open to reconsidering that assumption. Clearly something more subtle is needed.

Now, there are several ways of striving for that greater subtlety. The most obvious is to make some attempt to set out the absolutely central points on which one is not willing to compromise, and to ask about someone else's agreement only with those central points – combining that adamant stance with a flexible willingness to learn on all other matters. And some such attempt to set out what is central is, I think, an inevitable part of the mix – though it has perhaps not played quite as central a role in Anglicanism as it has in other traditions where a detailed 'Confession' of some kind has been central to the ongoing theological conversation.

However, Williams suggests, elsewhere in his work, a rather different way of thinking about this question. We can ask, when we are seeking to discover whether his or some other theological claim is obedient to the gospel, whether that claim is recognisably a contribution to a *common conversation* about obedience. That probably sounds irremediably vague, but stay with me for a moment. What I think he means is that, rather than asking a static question ('Does your position agree with mine, or does it agree with the points I have identified as central to mine?') Williams is suggesting that we ask a dynamic question: 'Having heard what you say, can I recognise the possibility of being *called to deeper obedience to the gospel* (given what I currently understand that obedience to mean) by what you say, and can I see the possibility (given what you currently understand that obedience to mean) of calling *you* to deeper obedience?'

With a question like this in mind, we might move from a picture of the world divided into those with whom I agree (wholesale, or on the fundamentals) versus those with whom I disagree, to a more complex picture in which, around the brittle circle of those with whom I agree, there is the company of those with whom I disagree but with whom I share a conversation: the wider circle of a community not in *possession* of consensus but in serious pursuit of it, hoping and working for it.

The boundary of this wider circle is, inevitably, much more difficult to discern than are the boundaries of consensus – though boundaries there certainly are. And those boundaries are not defined simply by the forms of obedience – by the bare fact that my opponent appeals to the same scriptures, say, or tells a broadly recognisable salvation-historical story. Even where those forms of apparent obedience are in place, I might find myself called to the tragic recognition that this opponent and I do not share a recognisable conversation, that I cannot call him to obedience (or he me) except by standing against him, in prophetic denunciation of one kind or another.

Let me illustrate this. Imagine that Williams were speaking to a Christian community that regarded 'obedience to the Gospel' as quite straightforwardly defined by unmediated appeal to the plain sense of the scriptures. By 'mediation', I mean the kind of arguments that we've been exploring all along – where the

emphasis falls on the attempt to develop a broader theological view on the basis of the scriptures, and then to read particular passages in its light even when that means going beyond the plain sense. In other words, I'm thinking of the kind of theological–ethical argument where the quotation of particular biblical texts seldom, on its own, settles anything. The community that rejects such mediation of scripture might find that, except to the minor degree that they found the plain sense of certain scriptures elucidated by Williams' readings, his arguments were largely irrelevant to their way of doing sexual ethics – or, worse, that they seemed like nothing more than sophisticated attempts to *sidestep* the scriptures. They would not be able to see his arguments as, in any direct way, calling them to deeper obedience (as they currently understand obedience). And they might find in return that they simply could not call him to deeper obedience, because the means by which they might do so – pointing out once again the plain sense of the scriptures in question – was consistently met with a 'Yes, but...' In such a situation, we might have to conclude that there is *not* a common conversation about obedience. The attempt at conversation would stutter to a halt.

Where it does not stutter, however, we have at least the possibility of what I just called 'a community not in possession of consensus but in serious pursuit of it, hoping and working for it.' Now, I want to suggest – and this is one of the central points of this whole series – that such a community will be characterised by the same threefold call that I have identified in Williams' sexual ethics:

1. the call to loving mutuality,
2. the call to faithfulness, and
3. the call to faith.

So, by analogy with Williams' Nagelesque analysis of sexuality, we are dealing with a community in which I seek your deeper obedience, but in which I also seek your seeking of my deeper obedience (if you see what I mean): I see that I can call you to deeper obedience, and I long for that, but I also see that you can call me to deeper obedience, and I long for that. We are, in other words, talking about a community capable of sustaining an interlocking economy of desire: I desire Christ; you desire Christ; I desire your desiring of Christ; you desire my desiring of Christ; I desire your desiring of my desiring of Christ; you desire my desiring of your desiring of Christ ... and so on. This is what, by inadequate shorthand, I have been naming the **call to loving mutuality**.

The **call to faithfulness** comes into play when we recognise the time-taking holding on to one another that is required by the pursuit of this desire. To borrow the language that Williams used in the context of sexual ethics, this is a matter of *unconditional public commitment*, commitment that recognises the existence of the kind of economy of desire just described, and that gives itself the time needed to sustain and pursue it. To be a community not in possession of consensus but in serious pursuit of it, hoping and working for it requires such commitment: it requires the safety that comes from being able to trust that you will not walk away from this conversation simply because we do not yet agree. Of course, it is not that divorce is impossible – but to walk into this with a prenuptial agreement that assumes the inevitability or propriety of divorce is already to betray the commitment involved.

Yet it is also important to say that this faithfulness is not a matter of 'unity for unity's sake' or of 'unity at all costs'. The faithfulness is there as the proper context for the pursuit of 'loving mutuality', the operation of the economy of mutual desire. The whole of this life is directed to the deepening of *obedience to the God of Jesus Christ*, obedience to the gospel. The call to loving mutuality and the call to faithfulness are inseparable from **the call to faith**.

So, there you go. If we're after a relationship with the Rowan Williams of 'The body's grace', we shouldn't be surprised if we find ourselves shackled up with the Rowan Williams of the 2008 Lambeth Conference. After all, the actions of the latter Rowan Williams are predicated on his belief that both 'conservatives' and 'liberals' – as well as a lot of people in between – are recognisably part of the same communion, because they are still capable of calling each other to deeper obedience. In that context, his task as Archbishop is *and can only be* to call them deeper into loving mutuality, to call them deeper into faithfulness, and to call them deeper into faith. And his single-minded focus on issuing those calls, rather than on advocacy of the particular position on homosexuality that he set out in 'The Body's Grace', is exactly what one should have

expected from the author of that lecture – unless one expected his ecclesiology to be based on a different gospel from the one that undergirds his sexual ethics. Whether one agrees with the specific ways in which he has pursued these calls – and there is, of course, endless scope for serious questioning on that front – one should be able to recognise that his ecclesiological manoeuvrings do not involve the unexpected abandonment of a previously principled position, nor are they desperate attempts to shore up institutional unity at the expense of Gospel truth. They are fundamentally a matter of hope and labour for the discovery of more of the truth of the gospel, by the main means available to us of such discovery – the Body’s grace.

* * *

I know that sounded like the peroration – but I haven’t quite finished. There is one last post to come in this series. Given the theology we have been exploring, it would be entirely inappropriate to finish in a way that appeared to smother conversation in a fluffy blanket of pious words about consensus. And since the motor of ongoing conversation is disagreement, that’s where I’m going to finish.

On ‘The Body’s Grace’ (13): Concluding Questions

I’m sorry that the pressures of an unexpectedly full and fraught academic term have completely derailed my blogging. I imagine that any momentum left in the readers of this series on Williams has vanished just as surely as has the momentum of the writer. Still, there’s a job to finish, and it only needs one post to do it – so here it is.

I simply want to end with a series of five questions with which this exploration has left me.

1. I can’t help wondering whether the Nagelesque description of sexual desire, whilst it works well for the situation he describes in his paper – the initial awakening and recognition of such desire, might have less direct purchase on the long term of an ordinary sexual relationship. There is at least a job to be done in showing how this kind of description can do justice not just to the agonic and the vulnerable in sexual relationships, but to the friendly, the funny, the sweet and touching, the pleasurable and the uncomplicated.
2. There’s a cousin to that first question. We live in a culture in which we regularly meet the claim that sexual activity can truly be casual – i.e., precisely the claim that sexual activity can take place without the complex of emotional involvement that Williams and Nagel describe. Clearly, one of the ways of speaking to this culture that ‘The Body’s grace’ holds out to us is the message that there is *so much more* to be discovered in the context of mutuality, faithfulness and faith. I find myself wondering, however, about the extent to which the agonic tinge of Williams’ descriptions of sex means that this call necessarily comes wrapped in the initial message, ‘You’re not *really* having any fun, are you?’ And I wonder how truthful and effective that is.
3. My third question is whether the sexual ethic set out in ‘The Body’s Grace’ hasn’t focused down too closely on the couple alone. What happens if, recognising that a sexual relationship is not simply an encounter between two independent individuals, we bring families, friends, rivals, and communities back into the picture?
4. The sexual ethic set out in ‘The Body’s Grace’ calls for processes of attentiveness and discernment, looking at the problems of power and manipulation that hover around sexual relationships. It is not clear, however, who is to do that discerning, in what contexts, and on what scale. Given the habit urgent desire has of clouding delicate discernment, I take it that we’re talking about more than an on-the-spot reflection by the protagonists – but *what* more? What ecology of pastoral process might ‘The Body’s Grace’ call for – from individual reflection via the counselling of particular couples in their specific situation through to public teaching from the pulpit?
5. Lastly, I worry about the question of Scripture. I am not saying that Williams’ position needs to be more scriptural (I think it is already formed by deep engagement with Scripture). But – for the sake of recognition, for the sake of the conversation – it needs to display its Scriptural rootedness at greater length (despite all the undoubted difficulties of doing so adequately). It needs to take it for

granted less — *not* in order to be captured by some naïve game of knockdown proof or disproof, but in order to show more clearly the forms of obedience by which it is shaped.

‘The Body’s Grace’ is simply one lecture. However interesting its vision, however provoking its arguments, it is at best a single contribution to a conversation that has much more territory to explore. Any hagiographic approach that suggests that this lecture somehow *gets* Christians sexual ethics, and that the rest is simply a matter of application, would be a betrayal of the wider ecclesial vision with which the lecture itself coheres. I’ve dallied here long enough; it’s time to move on.