

## **What is wrong with 'Right Relationships'.**

A term that has been much used in the recent sexuality debate in the Uniting Church is the term 'Right Relationships'. I want to argue that this is non-Christian terminology and therefore a source of deception for the church. Right Relationships is meant to be an alternative to Celibacy in Singleness and Faithfulness in Marriage (CISFIM). It is also a challenge to the belief that a marriage should only be between a man and a woman. Why is this? Because the emphasis is laid upon the quality of the relationship and not who is in the relationship. One of the basic tenets of the recent radical movement and its sexual revolution is the importance of experience. This says that as long as I am having a good experience and that experience is meaningful for me and 'congruent' to where I am at, then the experience is OK, and what's more, you should not oppress me by denying me the freedom of my experience. The perceived tyranny of the Christian moralist is replaced by the tyranny of the Person. The tyranny of the Person demands that I am OK, I know what is best for me, I am here to authenticate my being, ancient moralities (like the Bible) do not matter any more, I am free, man, free to be what I like, when I like and with whom I like. Well, we most certainly can choose our behaviour but we cannot choose its consequences. We are indeed free to build up and to destroy.

### Human Nature is not evolving.

The dynamics of human nature do not change. What scripture says about human nature is eternally true of human nature. Human nature is the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. There are the works of the flesh and the gifts of the spirit. The flesh fights and lusts against the spirit and the spirit fights and lusts against the flesh. This is the human situation and scripture speaks to it. Humans are basically sexual beings and our sexuality is basic to our identity and our humanity. Therefore these strong human energies need strong controls. To use the word 'control' antagonizes the 'freed' person. The freed person is meant to enjoy their Self and others, and is to enter into the freedom we allow each other. Freedom (to the freed person) must be the freedom to have any experience and to go wherever the experience leads. When Jesus recommends the straight gate and the narrow way, He is talking about limiting and guiding our experience. Holiness (which is sadly lacking in the current debate) is the refusal to look at certain things or to expose one's self to certain experiences. Now the controls of scripture are not about the level of our experience but about who we are having the experience with.

### Sexuality is safe in Marriage.

By God's design sexuality is safe in marriage. Before the sexuality debate arose there was no divisive issue about sexual identity. This does not mean that people never had sexual problems or adjustments to make, but that marriage was seen to be the place for their right expression. When you take sexuality outside of marriage (as the sexual revolution insists on doing) sexual identity becomes a major problem, because identity requires boundaries and boundaries are the very things that have been removed. A boundary tells me where I finish and someone else begins. Without well-defined boundaries, abuse has to occur. (It is interesting to note that with the removal of the sexual boundaries we have been most aware of the sexual abuse.) Abuse occurs because we cannot avoid the consequences of our behaviour. There seems to be a standard somewhere. But if an adult is in a beautiful, congruent, authenticating relationship with a youth (a

child or someone else's wife), who is to say that it is abuse? Those outside the relationship may protest but those inside the relationship may enjoy it. The outsider may talk about the consequences and the possible exploitation, but the insider just wants to get on with the experience, and not be judged by those not in the relationship.

Marriage is an objective boundary, socially engineered, to contain sexual energies and to give them a creative and safe expression. Outside of marriage, sexuality is a cruel master that promises so much and delivers so little. AIDS, which arrived as part of the sexual revolution, is now regarded as the single worst thing that has happened to humanity because of its devastation in the heterosexual community (let alone its devastation of the homosexual community).

#### When Marriage is reduced to Relationship.

The power of the Right Relationship argument is the redefinition of marriage as relationship. This is a reduction whereby marriage is said to be nothing but a relationship. It can be said that a marriage without a good relationship is not a marriage worth its salt. Or again, it can be said if you have a good relationship why get married. It is believed that it is the relationship that counts. Here the quality of the relationship and its experience over-rules who is in the relationship. So one can justifiably desert one relationship for another. Why be bogged down in one relationship when you could be in another that can work? Hang loose, man! This is why some people argue for a liturgy for divorce. A liturgy for divorce permits, for the grieved religious conscience, the transition from one relationship to another. It gives some recognition to the death of one relationship and the desired birth of another. The focus is totally on the individual and the integrity of their emotions. Human beings are perceived as individual atoms moving around in an environment where there is occasional, but not necessarily stable, union. The Person is the individual who must preserve their emotional integrity, the right to their body and how it is used and to what it will be attached. This rampant individualism refuses to submit to any attachment or responsibility, unless it can be seen to be in the Person's individual interest. When a relationship or situation becomes too demanding, unauthenticating, boring or alienating to the Person's perceived needs then, one has the responsibility, and should assert the courage, to leave. One owes it to one's self!

#### The Virtues of 'Right Relationship'.

Relationship is then perceived as the right way to go. It is therefore enshrined in a pantheon of virtues, a metaphor which suggests a goddess of relationships. The types of virtues that recommend Right Relationship have been listed in the Interim Report on Sexuality document of a Uniting Church Task Group. These are as follows (pages 23-25):

1. Honesty,
2. Trust,
3. Vulnerability,
4. Commitment
5. Equality and Mutuality,
6. Freedom,
7. Recognition of Limits,
8. Growth and Change,
9. Communication,
10. Community foundation.

The glue that holds these together consists of intimacy and congruence. Briefly these ten virtues may be described as

follows. Honesty is required because intimacy needs the honest expression of feelings for relationship to grow. Trust deepens honesty and intimacy. Vulnerability is ultimate freedom where we share our hurts in tenderness. Commitment is primary faithfulness. Equals have a just expectation of mutuality. Freedom means that each person in the relationship is allowed to grow and retain their individuality. In the recognition of limits we find intimacy and love. Growth and change require continued re-negotiation. Communication is necessary for the resolution of conflict. Intimate relations do affect the wider community. Now there are many values here that are worthwhile and have a Christian ring to them. Although it is interesting to note that none of the ten virtues listed above occur in the scriptural list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nor are any of them listed in the context of Christian virtue. I claim that that is because there is nothing holy about them. There is no language of cost, or sacrifice, or dedication, or submission to another. These ten virtues may be massaged into a Christian appearance, but at their core they are pagan. In these virtues you do not submit to another (least of all to God) because you are submitting primarily to an experience. The experience has control and the experience takes you, in its free access to you, where it wants you to go. The individual is not guarded by commitments to others. The individual, in the integrity of their experiencing, submits to the passionate access to others that intimacy provides.

#### These virtues lack objectivity.

These virtues are all about process. It is not where you are going but how you are getting there. Who is to judge where I am in a relationship? I am the judge. No one can judge for me. Questions such as How intimate am I being? or How vulnerable am I? or Am I being really honest? or Am I trustworthy? or Am I in genuine congruence? can be answered by no one but me. Other people can have an opinion, but that is only their opinion. I am the judge of whether the relationship is working, because the relationship depends on me! Other people giving advice (let alone God giving a commandment) only deny the essential privacy and subjectivity of my relationship. If other people tell me the relationship I am currently in could work, (when I say it couldn't) could be denying me my right to assert my perception of what is happening. If I follow others then I lose the track of my integrity and wholeness in the relationship. And I may become incongruent in my levels of sexual expression and intimacy.

#### Who is in relationship?

The lack of objectivity is shown also in the fact that Right Relationships makes no mention of who is in relationship. The quality of the relationship is the only measure of the significance of the relationship. This means that anyone can be in relationship as long as their relationship is a 'right' relationship. Presumably a relationship could be between a man and a woman, a man and a man, a woman and a woman, an adult and a child, a youth and a youth etc. It does not matter how the relationship gets going or who it is between. What matters is the quality of the relationship. Who is the judge of the quality of the relationship? Only those who are in the relationship, who are, of course, the judges of how genuine the relationship is. There is a broader question here. Is life to be judged by its quality? Do I give up on life because my current circumstances are not what I desire? To the Christian, life is a gift and we are not the judge of our life. Maybe we can be in difficult

circumstances, but life is not something for us to terminate, either in ourselves or others. Both abortion (life terminated at its beginning) and euthanasia (life terminated at its end) are a denial of life as a gift. God, in fact, gives us the resources to live our lives in Jesus Christ. We are not the judge of life, its quality or its termination. Although, in our arrogance, we insist on doing so.

#### How does a relationship receive correction?

There is no place in this list of virtues for insight and receiving direction or correction. Insight means that one level of experience corrects or even rejects another level of experience. How can we have a wrong experience? Presumably a wrong experience is an experience that does not attain a desired goal. So experience itself requires a goal outside itself to give itself meaning. The individual selects the goal. But what mechanism does the individual use to select the goal for experience other than experience itself? So the Person wrapped in the process of experiencing uses experience to determine their experience. If they look outside their experience will this not be alienating and a source of incongruence?

What about receiving correction and advice? That could be placing trust in a force or perception that is not congruent with my situation. Basically, the philosophy of the Person says that 'I am right'. If I am not 'right' then can someone else be 'right' about me and not me? Presumably the Person knows their Self best. Therefore the philosophy of the Person is full of protest rhetoric about being tyrannized by others, judgemental attitudes, the evils of submission and the joys of rebellion. ('Rebel' is now a marketable name. Imagine a clothing store called 'Submit'. Consumerism is based on Self assertion.) To accept advice is an act of defeat. Whatever is the logic of 'experiencing', it is most certainly not Christian.

#### The Christian rejoices in the Law of the Lord.

The righteous seek correction (Ps 141:5). Our life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3) and God is continually re-locating our experience. As Christians we are holy to the Lord and not available for any experience that the world, or our own intensity, may decide for us. What recommends the Christian life is not the quality of our experience (as good as that may be) but serving the kingdom of God and the rewards of heaven. Every Christian soon learns that experience (and maintaining its integrity) is a very poor guide to Christ. The Christian teaching on Repentance means that we consciously and specifically alter our experience (and capacity to experience) in the light of scriptural directive. I do not know what is best for myself! The real tyranny is the tyranny of my Self and my insistence on my own way! Broken-ness, in-congruence and discontinuity with my sin are my desire.

#### This debate lacks the word 'sin'.

There is nothing more offensive to the posturing Person than the word 'sin'. Sin suggests that there is another set of values and another valuable Valuer other than my Self. Sin says that there is another way of doing things that is beyond me and it may be of eternal significance. Immediately, sin casts my experiencing in a different light. The fact that I could be wrong may cause me to question my experiencing. The possibility of God being over against me could rattle my belief in the ultimate significance of my Self.

#### The Report's naivety.

There is a naivety in this report that continually places sexuality in the loving hands of mutually adoring adults. Such

virtues as congruence, vulnerability and mutuality require a moral sophistication and sensitivity that in the real world can be pushed aside by rampant sexual energy. In a relationship exactly who is using whom? And how can you tell? The protestations of sexual desire can claim all kinds of things in order to obtain the desired object. The seducer can imagine and speak all kinds of moral nonsense and emotional invention. Outside of marriage, sexuality is known for its passion, cunning and even violence. These things can occur even inside a marriage, but at least the victim has the moral and legal protection of the marriage. 'The heart is a lonely hunter'. In the face of such predation, when is the Person submitting to the relationship and when are they using the relationship? To use a relationship is inauthentic by these virtuous standards, but I would claim that people use relationships as well as be involved in them.

#### Right Relationship is Compassion without Holiness.

My argument is not against relationships as such, for we are all involved in relationships of one kind or another. My argument is that relationship is no substitute for marriage. Marriage brings objectivity, due social process, partner recognition, and a structure that outlast physical and relationship change. After all, the reasons I stay married are different from the reasons for which I got married. Relationship is based on need; marriage is based on vow. One can have any number of differing relationships at the same time; whereas marriage, in any sense, is exclusive. Relationship is variable; marriage is fixed. Relationship is subjective; marriage is objective. A relationship is defined by its quality; a marriage is defined by its structure. A relationship says 'I do love you'; a marriage promises 'I will love you'. When we confuse a relationship with a marriage, we substitute quality for commandment, feeling for structure and congruence for holiness. Holiness is about discontinuity and confrontation, not congruence and acceptance. The Christian life is based on the character of God, which is holy. God's love is primarily a holy love. Compassion without the containment of the holy, lands us in the quagmire of feelings and a religion that justifies everyone's personal conceit. It is not our task, as Christians, to invent a new cultural morality to justify the latest pagan passions. Our task is to be faithful to the Gospel and the faith 'once for all delivered to the saints', rebuking unrighteousness and standing by the terror of a holy God, who in due time will reveal His judgement on us all.