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DAVID HILBORN

Homosexuality, Covenant and Grace in the Writings of Rowan Williams: An Evangelical Response[1]

David Hilborn has read widely in the writings of Rowan Williams and here offers a helpful introduction to his thinking on homosexuality. He highlights Williams's limited discussion of 'covenant' and his emphasis instead on the experience of grace in various sexual encounters. In response he offers a gracious but clear evangelical critique that focuses on Williams's account of grace and his treatment of biblical texts.

Contexts and sources

Rowan Williams's published work on the issue of homosexuality is not extensive. There are no book-length studies. Indeed, the key paper written by him on this subject runs to fewer than 6000 words and is, in any case, concerned with various aspects of sexuality rather than with homosexuality alone. Even so, the fact that this paper was originally delivered in 1989 as a lecture to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, and the fact that its author's promotion to the See of Canterbury has since placed him at the storm-centre of debate about homosexuality, lends its approach to same-sex relationships special significance. The paper in question is called 'The Body's Grace', and recently reappeared in amended form as one of the texts collected together by Eugene F. Rogers in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings.*[2] Brief though it is in

1 Significantly shorter, earlier versions of this paper were posted on the Evangelical Alliance Website (http://www.eauk.org) in August 2002 and delivered as a lecture at the Tyndale Fellowship Triennial Conference at Regents Theological College, Nantwich in July 2003. I am grateful to all those, including the previous editor of *Anvil*, who offered constructive feedback on these earlier drafts and encouraged me to develop them into the text printed here.

2 Rowan D. Williams, 'The Body's Grace', in Eugene F. Rogers (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Blackwell, Oxford 2002, pp 309-21.The printed text of the original version of the paper is available from the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, LGCM, Oxford House, Derbyshire St, London, E2 6HG, UK, Tel / Fax 020 7739 1249. As I write (September 2003), the same paper is also accessible online (somewhat ironically given Dr Williams professed left-wing political sympathies) at http://www.iconservatives.org.uk/bodys-grace.htm.

length, 'The Body's Grace' is highly concentrated and, as we shall see, advances a range of arguments in respect of extramarital sexual activity in general, and homosexual activity in particular, which merit serious attention – even if, as we shall also see, those arguments turn out to be exegetically partial, theologically elliptical and ethically contentious.

Although 'The Body's Grace' warrants most scrutiny, three shorter texts published by Dr Williams in this field need also to be considered. The first of these is the address entitled 'Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?', which appears in his 1994 collection *Open to Judgement*.[3] The second is the paper 'Knowing Myself in Christ', which reviews the evangelical St Andrew's Day Statement on homosexuality of 1995, and which is included in Timothy Bradshaw's collection *The Way Forward?: Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*.[4] The third is the sermon 'Forbidden Fruit: New Testament Sexual Ethics' – published in Martyn Percy's 1997 book *Intimate Affairs: Sexuality and Spirituality in Perspective*.[5]

The dearth of 'Covenant' language

Across the four texts cited, Dr Williams adduces various theological models in the course of arguing for the legitimacy of certain forms of homosexual relationships – models which include creation, incarnation, fellowship and the Trinity. Yet the fierce debate which has arisen since his call to Canterbury underlines that the most significant point arising from his work on this topic may well be a point of relative omission or absence. Whether in New Westminster Diocese's adoption of a liturgy for the blessing of same-sex unions, in New Hampshire Diocese's appointment of the declared, sexually active gay priest Gene Robinson to be its bishop, or in the Church of England's 'Jeffrey John Affair', arguably the most profound theological concept at issue has been the concept of 'covenant'. The New Westminster service is cast explicitly as 'A Rite for the Celebration of Gay and Lesbian Covenants', and features an exposition which relates its endorsement of homosexual partnerships to God's covenants 'with Israel' and 'with the followers of Jesus'. Just as a covenant is 'an ancient form of promise, a public declaration of commitment that binds people in enduring relationships' and that forms the basis of 'people's liberation from slavery' and discrimination, so the exposition affirms the propriety of the church enabling a 'covenant' between same-sex couples, who, it implies, might themselves have experienced oppression and prejudice.[6] In similar vein, the election of Gene Robinson was widely justified in relation to a 'Baptismal Covenant' which defines the Episcopal Church's ministerial appointments policy in avowedly inclusive, non-discriminatory terms. Likewise, in his monograph *Permanent, Faithful,*

3 Rowan Williams, 'Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?', in *Open to Judgement*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1994, pp 161-67.

4 Rowan Williams, 'Knowing Myself in Christ', in Timothy Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward: Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1997, pp 12-19 [2nd edn., SCM Press, London 2003.]

5 Rowan Williams, 'Forbidden Fruit: New Testament Sexual Ethics', in Martyn Percy (ed.), *Intimate Affairs: Sexuality and Spirituality in Perspective*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1997, pp 21-31.

6 At the time of writing, the text of the New Westminster rite is available online at http://www.vancouver.anglican.ca/download/Rite.pdf

Stable, Jeffrey John proposes ecclesiastical approval of same-sex partnerships on the grounds that long-term homosexual partnerships may express a 'covenant commitment between two people which is holy because it reflects God's covenanted love for us, and gives us a framework for learning to love in his image'.[7] These covenant-based accounts of same-sex unions in turn reflect earlier 'gay covenant' paradigms commended by, among others, Michael Keeling, Elizabeth Stuart and Michael Vasey.[8]

In view of all this, it is striking that Dr Williams's work hardly mentions 'covenant' in relation to homosexual partnerships at all. Indeed, the word is not used once in 'The Body's Grace' itself, appears in just one sentence of 'Forbidden Fruit', and is discussed in only one paragraph each of 'Knowing Myself in Christ' and 'Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?'. In 'Forbidden Fruit', Dr Willams acknowledges that the NT does not easily allow 'any *straightforwardly* positive evaluation of sexual intimacy outside a relationship that is publicly committed', and takes this dimension of public commitment to have been essential for 'covenanted' relationships' as they have been defined by the Church down the centuries. However, although Dr Williams is generally sympathetic to gay and lesbian theology, the question whether any form of homosexual partnership might be incorporated within this covenantal framework is one on which he appears more ambivalent. Indeed, he takes seriously the fact that in many parts of the Church, 'the jury is out on whether some kinds of homosexual relation are effectively of the same kind as the relations between the sexes that Paul outlines, to the degree that this might outweigh Paul's denunciation of the prevailing homosexual lifestyles of his own day.'[9] The same kind of ambivalence towards 'covenant'- driven gay and lesbian apologetics is evident in 'Knowing Myself in Christ'. Here, Dr Williams acknowledges as 'now fairly familiar' the suggestion that promissory, covenantal imperatives rather than procreation should be prioritised in defining the raison d'être of sexual unions, not least because such covenantal imperatives might potentially include same-sex partnerships. But he also notes that this suggestion 'does not settle the matter', since 'many would respond that the covenantal imagery of Scripture always presupposes the order of creation as between a man and a woman.' Indeed, given such uncertainty, Dr Williams does little more here than observe that 'this is an area in which further theological debate should develop'.[10]

In 'Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?', Dr Williams is a little more directive on how a biblical understanding of 'covenant' could inform a modern-day account of sexual 'fidelity'. Having identified fidelity as 'the thing that makes sexuality meaningful in relation to God, or, at least, most fully meaningful', Williams goes

7 Jeffrey John, *Permanent, Faithful, Stable: Christian Same-Sex Partnerships (2nd Edition)*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 2000, p 4. (Originally published 1993).

8 Michael Keeling, 'A Christian Basis for Gay Relationships', in Malcolm Macourt (ed.), *Towards a Theology of Gay Relationships*, SCM Press, London 1977, pp 100-107; Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships*, Cassell, London 1995; Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1995.

9 'Forbidden Fruit', p 30.

10 'Knowing Myself in Christ', pp 18f.

instantiation with regard to gender, marriage, reproduction and social order and its most obvious articulations in Gen. 2:21-4 and Matt. 19:6, in Exod. 20:14, Lev. 18 and 20, in Prov. 2:17 or Mal. 2:14 – are passed over in favour of a more general concern. This is how physical relationships *as such* may be 'graced', and how the presence of 'grace' might *in and of itself* allow them to be defined as 'covenantal'. Indeed, it is at this point that Dr Williams's work on sexuality becomes more problematic. The extent to which he allows grace *as such* to subsume the contractual particularities of God's covenantal commands on sex, is precisely demonstrated by the absence of covenant language from his fullest account of this matter, and precisely signaled by his choosing to entitle that account 'The Body's Grace'.

As will become clear, Dr Williams avoids any crudely antinomian view of sexual relationships. Nevertheless, it must be said that 'The Body's Grace' is far quicker to warn against the 'legalistic' potential of 'enforceable bonds' of sexual partnership. Williams is far readier to disavow that turning of 'blessing into curse, grace into law, art into rule-keeping' which the contractual dimension of such relationships might mediate than he is to spell out the *continuity* of divine legal decrees within a positively graced sexuality.[14] Commending the distinctions drawn between faith and law in Rom. 3, Williams notes that 'Happily, there is more to Paul than the (much quoted in this context) first chapter of Romans!'[15] Yet as one looks more closely at the argumentation of 'The Body's Grace', another text from the same epistle suggests itself even more starkly: 'Shall we sin, that grace may abound?' (Rom. 6:1).

A Continuum of 'graced' sexuality

The core premise of 'The Body's Grace' is that the grace of God may operate even in quite flawed sexual encounters, and may thereby awaken those involved in such encounters to certain more positive aspects of their own God-given sexual identity. Against the classic 'legalist' view that all sex outside marriage is to be defined as 'sin and nothing else',[16] Dr Williams argues that even 'encounters fraught with transitoriness and without much "promising"' can help people to experience a divinely-sanctioned sense of 'enjoyment through the bodily presence of another'. However fleeting, this reciprocity of sexual 'pleasure and pleasing' can, he suggests, make us alive to our selves in a theologically significant way.[17]

Dr Williams finds a helpful illustration of this principle in the fictional story of Sarah Layton, a leading character in the novelist Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*.[18] At one point, Sarah is seduced by a predatory, calculating man called Ronald Merrick – an encounter which results in a pregnancy, and then an abortion. Even so, Scott describes Sarah's feelings after sex with Merrick as ambivalent rather than simply guilty or regretful. Indeed, he writes that through this liaison she was enabled to feel that 'she had entered her body's grace'.[19] Dr Williams does not presume that Scott uses 'grace' here in a strictly doctrinal sense, but he does suggest that Sarah's discovery that her body 'can be the cause of happiness to her and to another' offers

14 'The Body's Grace', p 315.
15 'The Body's Grace', p 316.
16 'The Body's Grace', p 313. Cf. 'Christian Sexual Ethic?', esp. p 162.
17 'The Body's Grace', p 313.
18 'The Body's Grace', p 309.
19 Paul Scott, *The Day of the Scorpion*, Heinemann, London 1968, p 454. Quoted in 'The Body's Grace', p 311.

a useful way in to considering what of God may be found in sexual activity conducted outside the parameters of monogamous heterosexual marriage. Insofar as grace for the Christian believer is taken by Williams to be 'a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself...as significant, as wanted', Sarah's seduction and consequent sexual self-discovery may be construed as in some meaningful sense divinely 'graced', even while being far from ideal. As I have pointed out, whether it could in any way also be defined as 'coventantal' is not something which Dr Williams ventures to consider. His willingness to bracket off the dynamic of 'promising' in this and other such cases suggests that 'grace' has come in a very real sense not only to entail but also to replace 'covenant' as the main motor of sexual legitimation in his theology.

Sarah's coupling with Merrick may be unsatisfactory in many ways – but then, notes Dr Williams, the same could be said of all sorts of sexual relationships, including many marriages. Created as we are in the image of God's triune co-inherence, we are made for 'intercourse' – both in the social and the physical sense.[20] Because of our estrangement from God, however, such intercourse is prone, on one level or another, to failure. Indeed, on this basis, Williams goes so far as to call attempts to get sex right 'doomed'.[21] Yet just as failure attends all our sexual relations, God's grace can also, according to Dr Williams, extend to a wide range of sexual expression, and not just to sex shared by a husband and wife. As he puts it in 'Forbidden Fruit', 'something of God is discoverable even in what we may recognise as involving error'.[22] Having said this, grace is fundamentally defined by concern and care for the 'other' – by God for us and by us for our neighbours, friends and lovers. Dr Williams therefore goes on to submit that it is far more likely to be apparent in sexual relationships which evince some genuine degree of mutuality, self-giving and shared power, than in sexual activities which are either introverted or 'asymmetrical'. On this criterion, he asserts that solitary masturbation 'says little about grace', while paedophilia, rape and bestiality can still justifiably be called 'perversions'.[23]

This appears at first sight to lead us back towards the vowing, binding and disciplined permanence of covenant language. It must, however, be stressed that, these more obviously solipsistic and exploitative sexual practices aside, Dr Williams's expansive reading of grace still implies, say, that the formative fumblings of teenagers testing their own sexuality could be seen as steps on a 'graced' journey towards wholeness. This is so even if in themselves they might fall much further short of such wholeness than a publicly validated, life-long heterosexual marriage lived out as a true covenant of care and commitment in the sight of God.[24] Then again, implies Dr Williams, people who find themselves trapped in 'sanctioned' marital unions which have become little more than 'a framework for violence and human destructiveness' may actually express far less of the grace of God than heavy-petting adolescents, or than adults whose relationships are compassionate but short-term. More specifically, he suggests that lesbian and gay male couples

20 'The Body's Grace', p 312.
21 'The Body's Grace', p 310.
22 'Forbidden Fruit', p 30.
23 'The Body's Grace', p 313.
24 'The Body's Grace', p 316; cf. 'Christian Sexual Ethic?' pp 165f.

on to suggest that our own 'yielding' to God in faith and discipleship would be 'terrifyingly uncertain if we did not take it for granted that God was [himself supremely] "faithful" – bound to us by covenant, by solemn self-commitment.' This covenant, writes Williams, is 'recalled and re-presented when we celebrate the Eucharist and remember the way in which God returns Jesus to us even after our most dramatic betrayal of him'.[11] As such, it is a covenant defined essentially by mutual promising, even if this promising 'does not take away the pain', and may actually 'intensify it in all sorts of ways'. Yet it is also a promising which 'frees us to give ourselves', in the knowledge that 'we are not going to be abandoned, written off, if we make a wrong move.'[12]

It would be difficult for any Evangelical – or indeed any orthodox Christian – to dissent from the basic connection that Dr Williams makes here between 'fidelity' and 'covenant'. Yet almost as soon as he has raised the concept of 'covenant' with regard to sexual relating *in general*, he drops – or rather re-expresses – it in favour of another concept which proves far more pervasive in his writing on specific *forms* of sexual relating. This concept is the concept of *grace* and, as we shall see, his preference for it over 'covenant' reveals a great deal about the assumptions which motivate his personal theological sympathies and commitments in this area of human sexuality.

The Pervasiveness of 'Grace' Language

In the paragraph of 'Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?' which immediately follows the one just cited, Dr Williams appears to treat 'covenant' and 'grace' in the context of sexuality as virtually synonymous, smoothly shifting from one to the other without pausing to explain either the differences between them, or how they might interrelate:

> God's faithfulness makes our risky faithfulness possible. And so in our relationships, mutual commitment has the same freeing effect. The grace that is to be discovered in nakedness, yielding, is released to be itself when we give up the self-protecting strategies of non-commitment, experiment, gratification, and decide for the danger of promising to be there for another without a saving clause that would license us to abandon the enterprise as soon as the other declines to be possessed unilaterally by us, as soon as the other's otherness gives us difficulty. In such a perspective, we have *time* for each other. A commitment without limits being set in advance says that we have (potentially) a lifetime to 'create' each other together. By making ourselves over to each other, we make something *of* each other.[13]

Now certainly, the 'legal', contractual nature of covenant – the vowing, binding and permanent committing implicit in the core biblical terms *berith* and *diathçkç* – is echoed here in Dr Williams's vivid link between the idea of sexual partners 'making themselves over' to each other in order to 'make something of' each other. But the *details* of what the contract might look like – its more specific scriptural

11 'Christian Sexual Ethic?', p 165.
12 'Christian Sexual Ethic?', p 166.
13 'Christian Sexual Ethic?', p 166.

might demonstrate depths of friendship, self-sacrifice and commitment which would put much ecclesiastically-validated wedlock to shame.[25]

Hence, God's 'gracing' of human sexuality is applied by Dr Williams to a *continuum* of varied sexual relationships – a continuum which contrasts markedly with the sort of either/or, godly/godless, sinful/righteous dualities which single out marital heterosexual monogamy as the only conceivably or legitimately 'blessed' mode of sexual living.

'The Body's Grace' has many other challenging things to say about sex. It construes celibacy, for instance, not as a suppression or denial of sexual drive, but as a re-direction of that drive into a life of prayer and worship which might be deeply sensual in its vivid language and symbolism – a point illustrated famously in the life and writing of St Theresa of Avila.[26] Yet it is Dr Williams's diverse perception of the 'graced body' in a range of non-marital sexual relations, and not least in homosexual partnerships, which is the most provocative aspect of his paper. It was this, above all, which prompted the strongest reactions in the furore surrounding his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury. It is this that has since impinged most markedly on the crisis surrounding Canon Jeffrey John, the tumult provoked by the New Westminster rite, and controversy surrounding the election of Gene Robinson to the episcopate. How, then, might thoughtful Evangelicals respond to it?

Framing an evangelical critique

The first thing to say is that we must respond carefully and charitably to what Dr Williams has written. Much of 'The Body's Grace' is deeply orthodox in relation both to God's character and to human nature. Evangelicals have differed on the extent to which humanity's 'fall' or alienation from God in Genesis 2-3 has tainted the image of God which people bear; but there has been strong agreement on the fact that men and women's relationships with God and one another are radically hampered by that fall – that they are radically affected by sin.[27] As Dr Williams observes, this sin mars all forms of relationship – marriages as well as homosexual partnerships. He is also surely right to suggest that in the face of such sin and failure, we are all without exception dependent on God's grace for the 'redemption of our bodies' (Rom. 8:23). No doubt, too, it is quite biblical to maintain, as Dr Williams does, that this grace can extend to sexual relationships conducted outside the bounds of monogamous marriage. It was present to some extent in Abraham's relationship with Hagar. It was present in David's relationship with Bathsheba – at least inasmuch as their liaison produced Solomon. It may also have been present in at least some of David's relationships with his concubines (1 Chron. 3:9). On analogy today, a premarital pregnancy may be unfortunate from a Christian point of view, but at least some couples undertake to make the most of things and progress to a fulfilled marriage and family life. Likewise, adultery is a sin, and surely not to be recommended – but an extra-marital affair may incidentally jolt a husband

25 'Christian Sexual Ethic?', p 166.
26 'The Body's Grace', p 318.
27 D. G. Bloesch, 'Sin', in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (2nd Edn.)*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 2001, pp 1103-07.

and wife to recover lost intimacy, communication and trust. To suggest that God's grace cannot work in and through such experiences is, indeed, to deny the very commonality and abundance of grace which is so characteristic a feature of evangelical soteriology and spirituality. It is to deny that God is present with us in the dark vales of life as well as in our richest moments of spiritual exaltation.

And yet there is a difficulty. It is a major difficulty, and it is to do with the partial and incomplete portrayal of 'grace' presented by Dr Williams.

Chen, Chesed and *Charis* in Relation to Covenant

No doubt, the Hebrew term *chen* denotes 'graciousness' in general, and can be taken to mean both pleasure offered and pleasure received *as such* – in sex as in numerous other human interactions. Taken in isolation, it might be possible to see this term and its field of reference as reasonably amenable to Dr Williams's concept of 'the graced body'. But there is another biblical Hebrew word which we translate 'grace' – the word *chesed*. This carries that much greater sense of grace as something *redemptive* and *salvific* which we find developed both in the NT concept of *charis*, and in the historic, doctrinal formulations of grace produced at the Reformation.[28] Just as *chesed* frequently evokes God's faithfulness to his covenant-people Israel despite their disobedience and rebellion, so *charis* is that free, unmerited gift of God through which all sinful people, Jew and Gentile alike, are justified and redeemed from death and condemnation (Isa. 43:2-15; Jer. 18:8-11, cf. Rom. 3:21-25; Eph. 2:5). Thus while grace may entail God's endorsement and approval of sexual pleasure, theologically it needs also to be seen in terms of God's guiding us away from sexual transgression, as from all other transgressions of his will. In this sense, grace has at least as much to do with the capacity to behave chastely in respect of God's covenantal *decrees* about sex, as it does with our desire for sexual self-fulfillment, or 'pleasure'.

It may seem strange to quote Walter Brueggemann in this regard, since he leans somewhat more towards Rowan Williams's *conclusions* on homosexual partnerships than towards those of most Evangelicals.[29] Yet Brueggemann is so perceptive on this more general interaction of liberty with decree, desire with obligation and grace with law in the discourse of covenant, that he offers a salutary exegetical and methodological corrective to the Archbishop, if not a political one! In an essay called 'Duty as Delight and Desire: Preaching Obedience That is Not Legalism',[30] Brueggemann argues that God's covenantal relationship with his people turns on

28 Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1950, pp 371-409; George W. Stroup, 'Grace', in Donald K. McKim & David F. Wright (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, Saint Andrews Press, Edinburgh 1992, pp 160-62.

29 See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993, p 19. Also Julia A. Wortman, 'The Gospel vs. Scripture? Biblical Theology and the Debate about Rites of Blessing: An Interview with Walter Brueggemann'. Online at http://www.intergrityusa.org/ctb/TheTheologyPiece.pdf.

30 Walter Brueggemann, 'Duty as Delight and Desire: Preaching Obedience That is Not Legalism', in Patrick D. Miller (ed.), *Walter Brueggemann: The Covenanted Self – Explorations in Law and Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1999, pp 35-47.

two essential, inextricably linked dynamics. The first of these is duty, or obedience – obedience, that is, to the commands of God which are so intrinsic to the language of covenant. These commands, he writes, are 'the disciplines essential to the revolution that is Yahwism'.[31] Such 'revolutionary discipline' applies just as crucially for Brueggemann, however, to the new covenant made manifest in Jesus Christ. Hence, he takes believers in OT and NT contexts alike to have made their obedience 'convincing' by having reordered 'all of their life from the ground up' – by having been prepared to stand as 'an oddity in the world, at odds with all the conventional orderings of society.'[32]

Now, however widely we apply Scripture's various prohibitions on homosexual practice today, it is fairly certain that in the context of their own time, they, too, bore out this covenantal 'oddness' and 'unconventionality' over against their surrounding culture – Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 against Canaanite licentiousness; Rom. 1:26-27 against pagan sexual idolatry; 1 Cor. 6:9 against the very promiscuity which had by then become synonymous with Corinth itself.[33] Likewise, despite the fact that sixteen centuries of Christendom in Europe subsequently made *repudiation* of homosexual practice the 'norm' and 'convention', it could well be argued that the rapid liberalisation of laws and social attitudes on homosexuality in the West over the past forty years has ironically cast Christians who continue to hold that homosexual activity is 'sinful' ever more in the role of those 'odd' or 'unconventional' obeyers of covenant commands described by Brueggemann. Even if Brueggemann himself might disagree on the specifics of this claim, his fundamental point holds good in respect of Rowan Williams's sexual ethics: whether Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic or Davidic, old or new, covenant entails not only grace, but also costly obedience to the laws of God.

Of course, as Brueggemann goes on to point out, such obedience is not to be defined merely as a grim sense of duty. Rather, in the OT especially, to obey God's covenant commands is, *in and of itself*, to inhabit a life of 'desire' and 'delight' – a life of love; a life, indeed, of 'grace'. Brueggemann suggests as an example of this the juxtaposition of obeying or 'keeping' God's law with the injunction to 'love' in the *Shema* of Deut. 6:5.[34] Even more powerfully in relation to our immediate concerns here, he goes on to highlight the 'erotic' dimension of this obedience-desire continuum, a dimension also expressed in the Psalms – most notably in Ps. 42, and in Ps. 19's depiction of God's ordinances as 'more to be desired than gold... sweeter also than honey, and the drippings of the honeycomb'.[35]

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31 Brueggemann, 'Duty as Delight', p 38.

32 Brueggemann, 'Duty as Delight', p 39.

33 I have considered the 'counter-culturalism' of these texts in my own paper 'Homosexuality and Scripture', in Jean Mayland (ed.), *Growing into God: Exploring our Call to Grow into God's Image and Likeness*, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, London 2003, pp 156-69. For further detail see Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 2001, pp 43ff. On Corinth, and 1 Corinthians 6:9 in particular, see, Anthony C. Thiselton, 'Can Hermeneutics Ease the Deadlock?' in Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward?*, pp 161-73.

34 Brueggemann, 'Duty as Delight', pp 45f.

35 Psalm 19:10; Brueggemann, 'Duty as Delight', p 41, pp 45-47.

Taking all this into account, Brueggemann concludes that the 'neat and conventional antithesis between law and grace is a distortion of faith, because there are no unconditional relationships in the gospel, but only relationships of fidelity that prize *both* freedom *and* accountability'.[36]

Leaving aside for the moment more detailed exegetical debate about the Bible and homosexuality *per se*, this reading of grace is clearly more satisfactory than Dr Williams's representation of it as 'knowing ourselves to be wanted'. Not least in relation to sex, 'wanting' and 'being wanted' are doubtless part of the picture, but from a biblical-ethical perspective, they are hardly the only, or even the main, dynamics to be considered. An adulterous older boss may 'want' his single female junior to prove his abiding attraction to the opposite sex, while she may 'want' him because she is searching for a father figure as she makes her way in the world. A teenage girl may 'want' sex with her boyfriend in order to keep him, rather than because she especially desires sex itself, whereas the boyfriend may 'want' sex with her largely for physical gratification, or to convince his male peers of his virility. A prostitute may 'want' sex with a client because she needs the money, whereas the client may 'want' her because he needs to satisfy his libido. In such cases, the relationship may be 'asymmetrical' in Dr Williams's terms, but it will not necessarily be *unequal* in respect of power, control or even contentment. People may well 'want' different things from a sexual liaison, but may yet be comparably satisfied with what they get out of it. Indeed, what they get out may be 'pleasurable' to them. But it may also be a long way removed from the sort of covenantally-grounded understanding of grace expounded by Brueggemann.

Simply 'wanting' and 'being wanted' is, in fact, a very sparse definition of the operation of grace in the context of sexual expression. At its most fundamental, grace defines God's granting to us of something we cannot or would not otherwise possess. Grace does not merely affirm or 'baptize' thoughts, feelings and actions we might have generated in any case; rather, it makes up a deficit in us – and the deficit it makes up is, above all, the deficit of sin. Granted, grace may sweeten and ameliorate otherwise flawed and disordered human behaviour: in terms of sex, we have already conceded as much. But in biblical terms grace does far more than this: it is radically transformative. It does not merely improve us or make us feel better about ourselves; grace saves us, and what is more, it saves us covenantally. This is to say, where sex is concerned, it saves us specifically in order that we might live obediently as members of Christ's body, according to God's commands, rather than being content merely to seek sensual palliatives for our 'bodies of death' (cf. Rom. 7:24).

Granted, grace *can* operate on a continuum, along which there may be a number of intermediate stages towards that eschatological goal which Paul calls 'full sanctification' (1 Thess. 5:23, cf. Rom 8:22-23). Applied to sexual relations, we might possibly envisage polygamy, concubinage, teenage experimentation – and even encounters such as Sarah Layton's – as at least somewhere to the right of 'zero' on this continuum. But whereas Dr Williams seems happy to describe several sorts of extra marital couplings as potential 'homecomings' to the graced body,[37] it is

36 Brueggemann, 'Duty as Delight', p 44. Emphasis added.

37 'The Body's Grace', p 313.

surely more realistic to see them as, at best, 'halfway houses'. They may meet immediate needs, offering relief, but are far distant from our intended habitation and falling well short (as sin in a key sense is 'falling short') of that 'home' in which God himself means the shared sexual activity of humans to thrive. This divinely-instituted home – this abode for mutual bodily intercourse, ordained by God in Gen. 2:24, is the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. Granted, Dr Williams is right to say that at least as much sinning can flow from married relationships as from other forms of sexual bonding, but this does not invalidate the unique covenantal status of marriage itself – a status which is affirmed not only by Jesus in Matt. 19:4-6 but also by Paul in Eph. 5:31-3. Covenants in general are frequently traduced and violated by the people of God in Scripture – but from God's point of view, the integrity of the covenant *per se* is not thereby voided. Indeed, it is precisely *grace*, working through repentance and faith, which can awaken and reconnect us to this integrity, and root it in us existentially.

Dr Williams on the specific biblical texts

If grace has so much to do with being saved from sin, it follows that any theological definition of grace in sexual activity must take serious corresponding account of what it is that Scripture actually defines as sexual sin. In the current climate, this is, of course, particularly pertinent in respect of homosexual activity. It is telling, however, that in 'The Body's Grace', Dr Williams largely sidesteps this more detailed interpretative task. He prefers simply to dismiss the Church's traditional prohibition of homosexual practice as based 'either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous biblical texts, or on a problematic and nonscriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures'.[38] It is one thing, however, to deal in such lofty, sweeping terms with a debate which threatens to split not only the Anglican Communion, but a number of churches in the coming years; it is quite another to examine in detail the biblical witness on this matter. On this score, not only in 'The Body's Grace', but in his other work too, Dr Williams disappoints.

Admittedly, 'Knowing Myself in Christ' does touch on some of the exegetical issues surrounding Rom. 1:26-7, but it deals with this text in a way which raises more questions than answers. Firstly, Dr Williams declares that it is the only text that need occupy serious attention, since it constitutes the only 'direct reference' to homosexual behaviour in the NT.[39] This is perplexing given the weight of established scholarly discussion on the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9, and on *arsenokoitais* in 1 Tim. 1:10.[40] Perhaps Dr Williams assumes that because these terms define some class or other of homosexual *persons* rather than homosexual *behaviour*, they can be left out of the equation. Yet one does not have to be a conservative or an Evangelical to realise that in each instance, the persons are precisely being defined by their sexual *activity*. In Paul's vice lists, just as 'drunkards' are defined by their drinking or 'murderers' by their murdering, so

38 'The Body's Grace', p 320.

39 'Knowing Myself in Christ', p 15. The discussion of Rom. 1 continues to p 18.

40 For a review of the voluminous literature produced on these texts and their relation to homosexuality in recent times, see Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. pp 303-336.

'sodomites' (NRSV) or 'homosexual offenders' (NIV) or 'sexual perverts' (REB) are defined by the sexual sin they actually commit 'in the body' (cf. 1 Cor. 6:18-20). Of course, as the range of possible translations illustrates, the exact detail, scope and modern-day purport of that sexual sinning may be debatable in each case. In 'Forbidden Fruit', Dr Williams does at least acknowledge this debatability with respect to 1 Cor. 6:9, commenting that while it might denounce 'the prevailing homosexual lifestyles of [Paul's] own day', correspondence between those lifestyles and the lifestyles associated with some modern forms of gay and lesbian partnership is unclear.[41] Yet Dr Williams's mere acknowledgement of this lack of clarity in 'Forbidden Fruit' hardly serves as an explanation for why he sees fit to bypass 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10 in 'Knowing Myself in Christ'. Again, it would help if he could tell us *why* these texts are 'very ambiguous', rather than simply pronouncing them to be so.

As for Rom. 1 itself, Dr Williams begins by noting towards the end of 'Knowing Myself in Christ' that 'some contemporary Christian interpreters' take verses 26-7 to refer to phenomena distinguished by 'considerable imaginative violence – the blind abandonment of what is natural and at some level known to be so, and the deliberate turning in rapacity to others.'[42] These interpreters are not named, but those who have expressed this view prominently include John Boswell, Robin Scroggs and Victor Paul Furnish.[43] Dr Williams must be aware, however, that the limiting of Paul's condemnation to coercive, exploitative pederasty and/or homosexual prostitution alone is highly contentious, and has met with robust counter-arguments from Robert Gagnon, Thomas Schmidt and Richard Hays, to name but a few.[44] Gagnon, for example, submits that Paul's culturally surprising inclusion of lesbian sexual practice in verse 26 'casts a wider net than abusive, male, pederastic relationships, inasmuch as lesbianism in the ancient Mediterranean world was not confined to pederastic models or rigid active versus passive roles.' Moreover, 'The fact that Paul segues from lesbianism in 1:26 to male homosexual behaviour in 1:27 with the words, 'and likewise also' (*homoios te kai)* suggests that he rejects both forms of homosexual behaviour for the same reasons; that is, on grounds other than their exploitative or oppressive character.' Hence, as Gagnon sums it up, the contrast here 'is not between exploitative homosexual relationships and loving homosexual relationships but between heterosexual and homosexual conduct.'[45] This is a significant point in favour of the traditional Christian prohibition of homosexual practice in general, but Dr Williams ignores it and chooses to press his original hypothesis instead: 'if this passage is indeed to be read as about the phenomena of homosexual behaviour in general', he writes, then it would 'have to

41 'Forbidden Fruit', p 30.

42 'Knowing Myself in Christ', p 16.

43 John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1980, pp 106f; Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homo-sexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1983, pp 114-16; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (2nd edn.), Abingdon Press, Nashville 1985, pp 52-82.

44 Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp 348-50; Thomas C. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow: Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate*, Intervarsity Press, Leicester 1995, pp 64-85; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1996, pp 383-89.

45 Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, p 348.

be said' that 'homosexual desire is not only intrinsically disordered but intrinsically rapacious in a way that other kinds of desire are not.'[46] This, however, is a false inference precisely because Dr Williams' earlier citation of 'some interpreters' assumption of 'rapacity' has here become a necessary – but no less false – premise.

Conclusion: homosexuality, grace and sin

In truth, Dr Williams needs to sustain the idea that the scope of Paul's condemnation in Rom. 1:26-7 is restricted to exploitative or oppressive modes of homosexual liaison because it serves his wider theological conviction that some forms of sexually active gay and lesbian unions might *in and of themselves* be divinely 'graced'. Yet given, as we have seen, that Scripture never commends homosexual practice, but instead presents significant general, covenantal and often counter-cultural prohibitions against it, it would surely be more consistent to surmise that any grace which might be associated with such practice would accrue *in spite* rather than *because* of it. Indeed, insofar as God might *redeem* particular homosexual encounters, he would do so precisely because, in and of themselves, they are sinful. Dr Williams does remind us helpfully that God, being the gracious God that he is, can very well bring some good out of our unrighteousness even before we repent of it. But it should be added that since this God is a God who desires relationship and co-operation from us, such grace does not excuse us from repenting of what he has revealed and defined as wrong. This is why the question whether we should sin so that grace may abound is answered by Paul with a resounding 'No' (Rom. 6:2). It is also why Rowan Williams's relation of the 'graced body' to whatever sexual pleasure we may share 'symmetrically' with another is both morally and hermeneutically flawed.

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46 'Knowing Myself in Christ', p 16.

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