Queer Theology in Evangelical Perspective

Church debates about same-sex relationships have been headline news for decades now. Countless books, papers, and reports have been published on this subject, and many congregations and denominations have been divided over it. Yet the focus of liberal and radical campaigning within and beyond the church has critically shifted of late, from recognition of gay male and lesbian partnerships to the much broader canvas of Queer Theory and Queer Theology. Rooted in European post-structuralist philosophy and intensified in the work of Judith Butler and others from the early 1990s, Queer Theory dissolves traditional distinctions of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ and proposes a diverse and often daunting spectrum of trans, pansexual, polysexual, genderfluid, genderqueer, and other identities, all of which are presented as ‘performed’ and ‘constructed’ rather than as stable, innate, or given. This session will explore the development of Queer Theory and its adaptation into Queer Theology by an increasing number of scholars including Marcella Althaus-Reid, Patrick Cheng, Lisa Isherwood, and Linn Marie Tonstadt. It will also show how queer theological ideas are entering more mainstream church discourse around LGBT+ issues. In particular, it will show how these ideas are characterised by a more general shift of focus from creation to eschatology, and how classic Evangelicals will accordingly need to marshal cogent counter-arguments in favour of biblical marriage and sexual chastity.

**David Hilborn** is Principal of Moorlands College, UK. Moorlands is an interdenominational evangelical college based near Christchurch in Dorset, with regional training centres in Birmingham, Torquay and Belfast. He was previously Principal of St John’s College, Nottingham and Assistant Dean of St Mellitus College. Before that he was Head of Theology at the Evangelical Alliance UK for nine years, also serving on the Executive of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission. David is an ordained Anglican minister and was a member of the Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission from 2006-2016. He currently chairs the Evangelical Alliance’s Theological Advisory Group. He is a graduate of the Universities of Nottingham (BA, PhD) and Oxford (MA), and has led or served on the ministry teams of five local churches. He has authored or edited several books, including *Picking Up the Pieces* (Hodder)*, The Nature of Hell, ‘Toronto’ in Perspective, One Body in Christ, Movement for Change* (Paternoster) and *The Atonement Debate* (Zondervan). David is a Londoner by birth and is married to Mia, a senior hospital chaplain. They have two grown-up children. He loves cricket and enjoys a wide range of music.

1. **Defining Queer Theology**
   1. ‘Umbrella term’ for diverse LGBTQIA+ approaches to Scripture, doctrine, tradition and spirituality (Cheng 2011)
   2. Radical philosophical and cultural approaches characterised by:
      * *Constructionist* epistemology of gender and sexuality
      * *Plurality* in sexual understanding and expression
      * *Ambivalence* and *fluidity* in construal of gender and sex (Isherwood 2011)
      * *Critique of heteronormativity* (Tonstad 2018)
2. **Contrasts with Evangelical Alliance statements on sexuality and transgender (2000; 2012)**

* Marriage, defined as ‘exclusive relationship for life’ between one man and one woman
* The ‘only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations today’,
* Homoerotic and other non-marital sexual intercourse ‘incompatible with Scripture’

* Authentic change from given sex not possible
* Ongoing trans[gender] lifestyle incompatible with God’s will in Scripture and creation

1. **Contrasts with classic Evangelical hermeneutics**

* *Claritas Scripturae* – perspicuity of Scripture (Luther)
* *Mens auctoris –* authorial intent/mind (Calvin)
* *Sensus plenior* – ‘fuller sense’; canonical meta-discourses/discoursal trajectories
* Contextualization – horizon(s) of present-day understanding and application
* Essentialism v. constructionism
* Binarity v. plurality
* Determinacy v. indeterminacy

1. **Provenance of queer theory, theology and hermeneutics**
   1. Beyond ‘gender critique’ of feminism
   2. Deconstruction of ‘homogeneity of *all* sexual identities as deceptive’ (Althaus-Reid 2016)
   3. Friedrich Nietzsche: the genealogy of morals and the will to power
   4. Michel Foucault: ‘Nothing in man – *not even his body –* is sufficiently stable…’
   5. Jacques Derrida – Deconstruction and *différance* as the subversion of binarities
   6. Judith Butler
      * Very subject of women ‘unstable’
      * Trans as default paradigm
      * Gender as ‘free floating artifice’
      * ‘The distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all’
      * “It’s a boy/girl!” as cultural ‘script’
   7. Critique of logocentrism/*phallo*gocentrism as ‘anti-theological’ critique (cf. Derrida; Barthes)
2. **Queer Theology as such**
   1. From liberal through liberationist to identitarian theologies
   2. Marcella Althaus-Reid – *Indecent Theology* (2000)
      * ‘The highest phallus *men* could conceive of: the Word of God’
      * New ‘sexual positions’ for systematic theology
   3. Lisa Isherwood
      * ‘New curiosities and challenges’ for biblical interpretation
      * Incarnational dynamism
      * Drawing Bible readers ‘into more of themselves’
      * Spiralling in to ‘the divine-human dance’
   4. Robert Shore-Goss
      * Queering Jesus himself
   5. Susannah Cornwall
      * ‘Reading queerness back’ into Scripture/queering Scripture
3. **Case Study: queer hermeneutical construals of eunuchs in Matt. 19:12 and non-marriage in heaven in Matt. 22:30**
   1. Matt 19:12
      * Classic evangelical interpretation: singleness, abstinence, celibacy (Hagner, Brunner, Turner)
      * Queer and queer-allied interpretations: intersex/trans/queer
      * Exegetical Revisionism (Megan De Franza)
      * Macro-Thematic Revisionism (Adrian Thatcher – proleptic/eschatological relativization of ‘all sex and gender roles in coming kingdom’)
      * Tonstad – biblical validation of transgender/gender reassignment
      * Evangelical critique: overdetermination and anachronism (Ian Paul)
   2. Matt. 22:30
      * Not marrying in heaven as relativizing marriage now? (Thatcher; De Franza; Song, Stuart, Mellenkot)
      * Evangelical critique: spurious prolepsis (Andrew Goddard)
4. **Conclusion: Evangelical v. Queer Theological divergences**
   * + Interpretative methodology
     + Epistemology
     + Language, meaning, truth and God (!)

**Suggested Further Reading**

***Queer Theology***

Althaus-Reid, Marcella, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics.* London & New York, 2000.

Althaus-Reid, Marcella, ‘Queer Theology’, in Martin Davie *et al* (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic.* London: IVP, 2016, pp.723-724.

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble.* London: Routledge, 1990.

Cheng, Patrick, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology.* New York: Seabury, 2011.

Cornwall, Susannah, *Controversies in Queer Theology.* London: SCM, 2011 (esp. Ch. 4 on Bible)

DeFranza, Megan K., *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female and Intersex in the Image of God.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.

Guest, Deryn *et al, The Queer Bible Commentary.* London: SCM, 2006.

Isherwood, Lisa, ‘Queer Theology’, in Ian A. McFarland *et al* (eds), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology.* Cambridge: CUP, 2011, pp.423-424.

Isherwood, Lisa & Althahus-Reid, Marcella, ‘Introduction: Queering Theology: Thinking

Thatcher, Adrian, *God, Sex and Gender: An Introduction.* Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011.

Thiselton, Anthony, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

Tonstad, Linn Marie, *Queer Theology.* Eugene, Or.: Cascade, 2018.

***Evangelical Assessments and Responses***

Anderson, Ryan T., *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment.* Encounter, 2019.

Evangelical Alliance, *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexualit*y. EA: London, 2012. (Eds. Andrew Goddard & Don Horrocks).

Gagnon, Robert, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics.* Nashville: Abingdon, 2001.

Noble, Thomas, Whittle, Sarah K. & Johnston, Philip S. (eds), *Marriage, Family and Relationships: Biblical, Doctrinal and Contemporary Perspectives.* London: Apollos, 2017. (See esp. contributions by Ian Paul and Andrew Goddard).

Walker, Andrew T., *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?* Good Book Company, 2017.

Webb, William, J., *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*. *Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis.* Downers Grove: IVP, 2001.