**SITUATION ETHICS**

What is most real to you? What matters most for you? Is it money and what money can buy? I doubt it, deep down. For you know that you can’t take it with you. And seldom does it bring real happiness. Is it love? That’s a good deal nearer. Because it has to do with persons, not things? John A T Robinson, writing about Honest to God, in the Sunday Mirror, 7/4/63

Joseph Fletcher, an American Episcopalian moralist, coined the phrase situation ethics in the 1960s in his 1966 book of the same title. In the spirit of the decade, he was responding to what he felt were the failures of legalism inherent in ethical systems that propose rules to govern human behaviour, whilst at the same time rejecting antinomianism - a total abandonment of rules and principles. Situation ethics essentially means that there is no ethical standard that can be uniformly or consistently applied, for each situation demands its own standard of ethics. In fact, there is no action you cannot perform if, in your judgment, the action is for a good cause, and if you have the proper motive in performing it.

Situationists would take as the example of Jesus in dialogue with the Pharisees as the model for their moral code. Whilst the Pharisees elaborated the Torah to accommodate every possible situation, Jesus went back to first principles. When asked about divorce law, Jesus referred them back to creation (Mark 10:1&//), rather than the Law of Moses, which was designed to accommodate man’s sinful nature.

Situation ethics are based on a single principle which enables man to enter every situation armed with the experience and precedents of past situations, but willing to lay them aside if the principle of love - agape - is better served by so doing.

Fletcher’s work was seized upon by J A T Robinson, whose famous book, Honest to God, laid aside traditional values, arguing that if man operated within the spirit of love he would be prevented from performing immoral acts. No rules were therefore necessary, because love would decide then and there in the situation the best course of action. Robinson wrote: ‘Dr Fletcher’s approach is the only ethic for ‘man come of age’. To resist his approach in the name of religion will not stop it, it will only ensure the form it takes will be anti-Christian’.

- **Situationist Principles**

  Fletcher maintained that there was a middle way between legalism and antinomianism and this lay in the application of agape, the love which Jesus commanded:

  - ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself’ - Luke 10:27
  - Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends - John 15:13
  - And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us - 1 John 3:23
  - The case of the Canaanite harlot, Rahab, can also be used to demonstrate situationist principles in the bible. Rahab lied in order to save the Israelite spies; and yet, she is commended in the New Testament record (Heb. 11:31; Jas. 2:25).

  Fletcher maintained that love is the principle of utility - it is a principle that can be applied in every situation, and which will enable us to achieve the greatest good. He proposed four presumptions of situation ethics:

  - **Pragmatism** demands that a proposed course of action should work, and that its success of failure should be judged according to the principle
- **Relativism** rejects such absolutes as 'never' or 'always'
- **Positivism** recognises that love is the most important criterion of all
- **Personalism** demands that people should be put first.

Fletcher defined love as always good, the only norm, and is justice distributed. It is not necessarily liking, and only the end of love justifies the means. It makes a decision there and then as to how to act in each individual situation.

**Strengths of Situationism**
- Individual cases are judged on their own merits, irrespective of what has been done in similar situations in the past.
- Individuals are not subject to rules which bind them. Nothing is intrinsically wrong or right, except the principle of love.
- Love seeks the well being of others even if the course of action is not one of preference.
- It is modeled on the teaching of Jesus, and so could be considered a truly Christian.

Robinson wrote: Dr Fletcher's approach is the only ethic for 'man come of age'. To resist his approach in the name of religion will not stop it, it will only ensure the form it takes will be anti-Christian.

**Weaknesses of Situationism**
- Graham Dunstan wrote of Fletcher's theory: 'It is possible, though not easy, to forgive Professor Fletcher for writing this book, for he is a generous and loveable man. It is harder to forgive the SCM Press for publishing it'.
- In *The Honest to God Debate*, Glyn Simon wrote, 'A false spirituality of this kind has always haunted the thinking of clever men…'
- Despite Fletcher's attempt to be anti-legalistic, the application of one principle only is, in itself, makes it a legalistic approach. To say no rules apply, and yet to also say the only rule is love, offers something of a contradiction.
- The cases on which Situation Ethics is based are exceptional cases, in which general rules do not apply. Most ethical dilemmas offer an obvious course of action without resorting to Situationism.
- The theory is teleological, dependent on the calculation of consequences. It is impossible to be unfailingly accurate in making such a calculation.
- The theory justifies adultery, murder, and even genocide in the interests of love. Surely Fletcher is guilty of calling good, what is in reality, evil.
- Fletcher is overly optimistic about the capacity of human beings to make morally correct choices, and not to be influenced by personal preferences. Human beings need the guidelines offered by rules to avoid moral chaos.
- Law and love are seen as mutually exclusive; Paul writes that love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10).
- Situationism assumes a sort of infallible omniscience that is able to always precisely predict what the most loving course of action is. The ideology assumes that love is some sort of ambiguous, no-rule essence that is a cure-all for moral problems. At its extreme situationism is not substantially different from nihilism, for, as Joseph Fletcher confesses: “For the situationist there are no rules – none at all”
- If a person tells a lie to protect himself or his family from harm, it may be in a different category than telling a lie for the purpose of doing someone else harm but there are still some assumptions behind such an action that are dangerous:
Firstly, one is assuming that if he tells a lie it will produce a good result. The reality is that the person intent on doing the harm may do even more harm if he finds out you are lying.

Secondly, one is assuming that God is either unwilling or unable to help a person who has enough faith to be more concerned with being truthful.

Thirdly, to observe or to disregard God's commandments simply because a person feels that it will be best to do so, leaves the door wide open for doing anything they may choose if he feels that the good results justify disobeying God.

T Pierce Brown suggests that if the principle of Situation Ethics applied, then 'If I had been in the shoes of Shadrak, Meshach or Abednego, I can easily visualize myself saying, “God, I know you said not to bow down to any graven image, and you know that in my heart I am not bowing down. But you will pardon me if I bow my head, for if I do not, the furnace of fire awaits me. I have no fear for myself, but I am wanting to stay alive for the sake of my poor wife and children.” I think it probable that God would have understood and showed mercy on all of them if they had thus acted. He showed mercy on Peter when he lied, cursed and swore that he did not love the Lord, and I have little doubt that he would show mercy on me if I should lie to protect my family from harm. That has little, if anything, to do with the idea that it is appropriate to do it, or that God would approve of it.' Published in The Old Paths Archive (http://www.oldpaths.com)
Utilitarianism

1. What is Utilitarianism?
Utilitarianism is an ethical theory, most often attributed to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It is based upon the principle of utility, which suggests that, where a moral choice is to be made, then the right action is the one which produces the greatest happiness (or the least pain) for the most people. The theory is summed up by the phrase the greatest good for the greatest number. It is a consequentialist approach, because it relies on the consequences of actions.

‘By utility is meant that property of any object whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness’ Jeremy Bentham: ‘An Introduction to the Principles of Morals & Legislation’.

2. The work of Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832)
Bentham’s theory is one of universal ethical hedonism: if an action brings or increases pleasure, then it is right. For Bentham, society is a collection of individuals, and that what is right for society is that which provides the greatest happiness of the majority of those individuals. Everyone counts equally and all people have an equal right to happiness. Bentham devised the Hedonic Calculus to calculate the most pleasurable action. Seven elements are taken into consideration:

- Intensity
- Duration
- Certainty
- Propinquity (remoteness)
- Fecundity (chance of their being further pleasures)
- Purity (not followed by pain)
- Extent of pleasure.

This is sometimes called act utilitarianism, because it is based on actions. It makes a quantitative assessment – good or bad actions can be worked out according to predicted results. A person can calculate which action is more likely to produce the right result by reaching a happiness score.

3. The work of John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873)
John Stuart Mill developed the principle further by talking about qualitative rather than quantitative pleasure. He argued that not all pleasures were equal and that pleasures of the mind should take precedence over physical pleasures. Once basic human requirements for survival are fulfilled, a human being’s primary moral concerns should be for the higher order pleasures: ‘It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied’.

For Mill, the problem with Bentham’s hedonic calculus was that it seemed that lower pleasures, such as violence, could be justified if they were carried out by a majority on a minority. Mill believed that it was possible to educate people to seek higher pleasures. Bentham, on the other hand, maintained that it was a matter for each individual to decide what was good or bad and as such, his principle was an egalitarian one.

Mill also proposed the harm principle. When referring to the pressure which a majority can impose upon a minority, he argued that this ought to be limited to the prevention of harm to
others: ‘That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.’

Instead of a Hedonic Calculus, Mill proposed that general rules should be used as guides in decision-making concerning moral actions. This is sometimes called Rule Utilitarianism. If moral actions are guided by rules that everyone follows then this will lead to the greatest overall happiness. There are certain rules that promote happiness – such as keeping promises or not stealing, for example. Rule utilitarianism suggests that a person should follow established rules and consider the practical consequences of an action before carrying it out.

This approach is sometimes divided into strong and weak rule utilitarianism. Strong rule utilitarianism says that certain rules have universal value and should always be kept, no matter what. Weak rule utilitarianism argues that there will sometimes be circumstances in which it would be better to allow for exceptions to these universal rules. This is a situationalist approach and there are no absolutes or intrinsic moral commands.

More recently, R.M.Hare argued for what could perhaps be called preference or motive utilitarianism. Here, the decision as to what is the right action takes into account the preferences or motives of the individuals involved. Thus, the right action is the one that satisfies the preferences or motives of the majority.

### 4. Strengths of Utilitarianism
- Utilitarian theories support the general view that human well-being is intrinsically good and actions should be judged according to their effect on this well-being.
- The preaching of Jesus requires people to work for the well being of others: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Matthew 7:12).
- A person’s motives may be good or bad, but only consequences have any real effect.
- The principle encourages democracy. The interests of the majority are considered, and a dangerous minority is not allowed to dominate.
- Circumstances now can be judged without reference to previous ones. Just because it would be wrong for one man to drive at 90 mph, because he is angry and distracted, it does not necessarily follow that in another man’s completely different circumstances it would be wrong for him, since he may be rushing to a medical emergency.
- It is an approach that does not rely on controversial or unverifiable theological or metaphysical principles.

### 5. Weaknesses of Utilitarianism
- In practice, the theory needs people to predict the long term consequences of an action. However, there is no guarantee that circumstances will turn out exactly as predicted.
- Not every action done out of good will is going to result in good consequences, but the attitude with which it is performed ought be worthy of some credit.
- The theory cannot be used to decide what is really universally good.
- The majority is not always right. There should be consideration of both the majority and the minority views.
- The theory is too simplistic. People cannot solve every dilemma by reference to one ethical theory, because every dilemma is unique.
- The rights of an individual or group can be ignored if it is not in the interests of the majority – even if their claim is fair and just.
• It makes no allowance for personal relationships: if a child is dying in a fire, reason would not tell the father to first rescue an eminent scientist who was also in danger, even if, arguably, greater happiness of society as a whole was to be gained.
• Religious believers may not be motivated by pleasure and happiness. They may be willing to endure pain, humiliation or self-sacrifice for a cause they believe to be true.
War and Peace

1. The Dilemma
One of the most important functions of the state is to preserve the security of its citizens and the nation. In the religious context, going back to ancient times, people have expected God to protect them from their enemies. Yet in the Old Testament, God is frequently seen engaging in conflict against the enemies of his people – for instance, at the time of Moses, when God destroyed the Egyptian army by closing the Red Sea upon them:
‘That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore’ (Exodus 14: 30)

Even so, the Biblical writers knew that the causes of war were rooted then, as now, in human selfishness and greed. Wars were, and still are, more likely to be caused by rivalry over land, wealth and international pride and status than over a genuine desire to fight evil with good. Thus, in the New Testament, Jesus refused to take the way of military power to achieve his goal, and challenged his disciples when they attempted to do so themselves:
‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword’ (Matthew 26:52)
Jesus told his followers that they must expect to suffer injury and humiliation without resistance or anger: ‘Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...’ (Matthew 5:39).

Jesus taught the ideals of righteousness and peace, to love enemies and resist revenge. He said was that a believer should not resist against personal insult and injury. His concern was that his people should be prepared for the great spiritual battle between the people of God and the forces of evil. Paul wrote about the life of the believer in military terms: “…take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 5:16-17)

The Bible does not answer clearly the central question of whether a religious believer should participate in warfare. The early Church adopted the general principals of non-retaliation and pacifism. However, there was a feeling that, when motivated by love and to oppose evil in the world, it might be necessary, for believers, albeit reluctantly, to use force. This all came to a climax one hundred years after Christianity had become the official religion of Rome. The Emperor Constantine believed that the reluctance of Christians to fight was weakening Rome’s defences and the Church was forced to say very clearly where exactly it stood.

2. The Solution – the Just War Theory
The Church’s reply was the famous response of Augustine, who advocated the Christian form of the Just War theory. This consisted of nine principles, six concerning the beginning of war, and three concerning the conduct of war. It stated that, although life is sacred, it may, at times, be necessary to kill in order to protect or defend the lives of others. The principles were:

Resort to war: *jus ad bellum*
- **War must be in a just cause.** to save life or protect human rights; to secure justice, remedy injustice; it must be defensive, not aggressive.
- **It must be declared by a competent authority.** Normally, this would be the government, who are the legitimate authority to declare war, although in the Islamic concept of *jihad*, the legitimate authority is that of a religious leader.
- **There must be comparison of justice on both sides.** This is difficult to achieve, since both sides will claim that they are fighting a just cause.
• There must be right intention, which must be as just as its cause - i.e. not undertaken in a spirit of hatred or revenge.
• It must be a last resort - after all negotiation and non-military sanctions have failed.
• There should be a reasonable likelihood of success: there should be realistic prospects of its outcome resulting in a better state of affairs than would otherwise prevail.

Conduct in war: jus in bello
• There should be a reasonable proportion between the injustice being fought and the suffering inflicted by war. The cause of justice must not be upheld by inflicting suffering on those the war was intending to protect.
• Proportionality - the use of weapons must be proportional to the threat and only minimum force should be used.
• Warfare must be discriminate. Civilians must be protected as far as possible.

3. Problems with the Theory
These principles have been criticised over the years for being impractical and impossible to guarantee. It has been claimed, the principles can be applied to any war situation to make it appear to be just from both sides. Indeed, the existence and the use of nuclear arms goes way beyond the conditions in warfare that were envisaged by Augustine.

Modern weapons can destroy the whole planet, and wars now involve entire countries and peoples. Moreover, as has been seen in recent conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, attempts to confine attacks to military targets only are open to human error. The problem is a serious one for religious believers - the biblical concept of a spiritual war against evil and of the legitimacy of fighting for the cause of right could not take into consideration the extent to which humanity’s power to destroy himself and his world would grow.

Today, therefore, a religious believer may feel that they have no option but support pacifism rather than risk the escalation of a conflict into a nuclear war. Those who support the principle of the sanctity of life would say that all deliberate acts of killing - including those in war - are forbidden; the just war theory can never support military action. Whilst the church’s view has been that it may be a proper duty for a Christian to fight for justice, pacifism has sufficient support for it to be taken seriously, and the right to conscientious objection is acceptable by many nations.

4. Pacifism
‘True Christians use neither worldly sword nor engage in war, since among them taking human life has ceased entirely’ (Conrad Grebel)

Pacifists believe that the requirement to love an enemy is absolute and that the state has no right to order people to fight. Absolute or total pacifism is the view that there should be no use of military force at all – whether or not the cause is just. The inspiration for pacifism is the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He encouraged his followers not to resist an evil person, but to turn the other cheek, love their enemies, pray for their persecutors, and give up their right to lex talionis – justifiable and limited retribution for injustice. Jesus did not rebel against the Romans and did not advocate rebellion or civil disobedience. In dealing with the world, Christians should meet their enemies not with hatred, but with kindness: ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Matthew 5:44)
In Romans 13, Paul taught that the state should be respected as the bearer of God’s authority to rule and that rebellion against the state is rebellion against God: ‘Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted’ (Romans 13:2). Some pacifists take the view that violent struggle for justice is, sometimes, legitimate and may adopt relative, selective, or nuclear pacifism. This is the view that innocent blood should not be shed and that civilians should not be killed in wars. Supporters claim that the role of the state is to protect civilians, not to kill them. The Second Vatican Council were aware that the just war theory had to be reconsidered in a nuclear age when conventional approaches to war were not compatible with modern weapons of warfare, and declared: ‘Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself.’ Similarly, the Church of England’s report, The Church and the Bomb declared: ‘Such weapons cannot be used without harming non-combatants and could never be proportionate to the just cause and the aim of war.’

Perhaps the most important factor of all is the need to make peace and to end wars. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promised God’s blessing on peacemakers. Peace making is a divine activity which God’s people are required to undertake, through prayer, public debate on issues of peace and war, and by making a positive stand for peace as a realistic and desirable goal. The ultimate aim of the religious believer should be to promote peace and reconciliation, and to set an example in non-violent resolution of conflict.
Religion and Morality

“Are things good because God commands them or does God command that which is good?”
- Plato’s Euthypro Dilemma

Are God and Morality linked?

The relationship between God and morality depends on where morality comes from – does it come from God or from humans? **Newman** argues that morality comes from a personal lawgiver:

‘If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claim on us we fear.’

Newman suggests that it is God who fixes that law. Our experience of morality is such that it leads us to conclude the existence of a lawgiver; otherwise our moral experience has no foundation and makes no sense.

In the same way, **H P Owen** argued:

“It is impossible to think of a command without a commander...Either we take moral claims to be self-explanatory modes of impersonal existence, or we explain them in terms of a personal God.”

This view supports **Plato**’s dilemma – God gives commands and what he commands is good. Religious believers say that God makes moral commands because he is the Creator and has the right and power to say what is good in his creation. God is the perfect form of the good and human goodness should reflect God’s goodness.

God’s moral law is found in the scriptures, for example the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), which are believed to be God’s law, as given to his people many centuries ago, but which are still relevant today. These commandments are expressed in very general terms and can be applied to a wide range of modern dilemmas which are not specifically addressed in the Bible, such as abortion and euthanasia. Similarly, in the New Testament there are the teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount, that offer guidelines as to what to do when faced with a moral dilemma.

**John Wesley** argued that humans know God’s law through their conscience, which is their link to God. People feel guilt after disobeying a moral law because they feel responsible to God. If this is indeed so, then morality and religion are linked.

Does Morality prove the existence of God?

In ‘The Critique of Practical Reason’, **Kant** argued that the existence of morality proved the existence of God. Everyone could understand moral law, which was the highest form of good and humanity had a duty to seek the perfect state of affairs, which he called the *summum bonum*. This duty is a *categorical imperative* which humanity must pursue. The perfect state could not be achieved in this life, and so it needs to God to bring it to fulfilment in an afterlife. For Kant, there was no morality without God because without Him the summum bonum could not be achieved.
Kant’s argued that moral goodness should be rewarded by happiness. The achievement of the *sumnum bonum*, was therefore an **obligation**. However humanity is unable to accomplish this perfect state of affairs without help. Kant wrote:

“It follows that the postulate of the possibility of the highest derived good (the best world) is likewise the postulate of the reality of a highest original good, that is to say, of the existence of God”.

Kant’s argument, that morality proves the existence of God, is an **a priori** one. In other words, it was not humanity’s experience of the world that points to the existence of God, but it is by reason that morality demands his existence.

In the *Summa Theologica*, **Aquinas** argued in the Fourth Way that the existence of morality pointed to the existence of God:

“Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like…. there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection, and this we call God”.

Aquinas claimed that the goodness, virtue and truth found in human beings is a reflection of the perfect goodness of God. His moral perfection is evidence for his existence.

**Morality only proves the existence of God if we are able to prove that the only source of moral authority is God. However, morality may come from non-religious sources.**

**Are God and Morality totally separate?**

Morality may not come from God. Morality might be explained in terms of impersonal forces, such as our sense of conscience and obligation or the needs of our society, culture, rationality, evolution or education. After all, if all religions have a moral code that comes from God, then why do they differ over matters of morality?

To argue that God is the source of moral law demands that we have to believe that morality rests on obedience to God’s commands. But if moral commands are merely expressions of approval or disapproval or if they are relative to our culture, then they cannot prove the existence of God. **Bertrand Russell** argued:

‘I love the things that I think are good, and I hate the things that I think are bad. I don’t say that these things are good because they participate in the Divine goodness.’
Sexual Ethics

1. What is sexual ethics?
   - Issues in personal sexual relationships which are open to debate and difference of opinion.
   - Issues which are concerned with the value of individuals and the responsibilities of humans one to another in the area of sexual morality.

2. Why is it important?
   - Because it is of concern to society and to individuals.
   - Matters of sexual ethics are subject to legislation.
   - Because religious teaching includes guidance and rules on matters of sexual relationships.

3. What is an issue or dilemma in sexual ethics?
   An issue which raises questions that are not easily resolved. For example, the question of whether sexual relationships should only take place within marriage, or whether the age of consent should be raised or lowered.

4. The issue we’re concerned with...
   To what extent should homosexuals be involved in the Christian church?

   *Why is this an issue?*
   Because there is a difference of opinion between Christians as to how far homosexuality is a sin, or a sickness, and to how far homosexuals should be involve in the church, as church members or leaders.

5. The evidence...

   **Biblical teaching offers one way of attempting to resolve this dilemma:**

   The OT teaches against homosexuality: *Do not lie with a man as with a woman, for it is an abomination* (Leviticus 18.22).

   Paul writes to NT churches condemning ‘homosexual offenders’ as unable to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven and claims homosexual relationships are a perversion which is a result of the Fall (1 Corinthians 6 and Romans 1).

   ‘Men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.’
(Romans 1:27). Paul included homosexuality in the list of moral evils: ‘Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders…will inherit the Kingdom of God’. (I Corinthians 6:9-10).

On the grounds of these teachings, conservative Christians who accept the literal truth of the bible, claim that homosexuality is fully incompatible with being a Christian.

**The church:** Christian churches who believe that homosexuality is a sin base their teaching on these teachings and on ethical theories such as natural moral law which assert that it wrong. Evangelical protestant churches take seriously the responsibility to ensure that homosexuality does not compromise the morality of the church. This may include excluding homosexual Christians from the community and urging they undertake counselling to ‘cure’ them of their condition.

- For example: Ted Haggard, pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado who was dismissed after revelations of his involvement with a gay prostitute.
- Extreme example: Westboro Baptist Church: Single theological and moral principle based on the claim that ‘God hates fags’.
- Roman Catholic Church: ‘In sacred scripture homosexual acts are condemned as a serious depravity and presented as a sad consequence of rejecting God’.

Roman Catholic Priests are not permitted to have a homosexual orientation. Those who are homosexual must be celibate. The Anglican Church accepts that homosexuality may be natural condition and so permits homosexual clergy, but they must be celibate.

6. **Situation Ethics – another way of resolving the problem:** The most appropriate way of dealing with the moral problem is to ask what is the most loving thing to do

Yet, for many Christians, these harsh words seem to go against Jesus’ teaching of love and respect for all people. Indeed, the Methodist Church declared: ‘*For homosexual men and women permanent relationships characterised by love can be an appropriate and Christian way of expressing their sexuality*.’

In a similar vein, whilst the Church of England does not recommend physical expression of homosexual orientation, it acknowledges that the church must respect those who: ‘...are conscientiously convinced that they have more hope of growing in love for God and neighbour with the help of a loving and faithful homophile partnership, in intention lifelong, where mutual self-giving includes the expression of their attachment’ (*What the Churches Say*, 2nd Edition, CEM, 1995).

- However, this is not a universally acceptable position for many Anglican Christians:
In July 2003, Canon Jeffrey John, an openly homosexual, though celibate priest, reluctantly withdrew his acceptance of the post of Bishop of Reading. He did this to avoid creating a worldwide split in the Anglican Church over homosexual priests. This caused great division in the church. The Dean of Southwark, the Very Reverend Colin Slee observed: ‘Canon John has become the victim of appalling prejudice and abuse which has its main proponents within the Church of England…the news will hurt thousands of Christian people who are not gay but believe strongly in God’s love and redemption for all his children equally.’

Soon afterwards, the Anglican Church worldwide was torn apart when the Nigerian church, which has 17 million members, openly opposed the ordination of a gay bishop, Gene Robinson, in the USA, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria said of homosexuality: ‘Such a tendency is clearly un-Biblical, unnatural and definitely un-African.’

As a result, in July 2008, the Archbishop of Canterbury reluctantly called for a ban on homosexual priests becoming bishops in the Anglican Communion worldwide. In the Christian Church, homosexuals are treated with a greater degree of equality than they had been in previous years, but the controversy remains and true equality is still a long way off.

7. How far is this dilemma unresolvable?

It is unresolvable if it depends on finding an absolute unchangeable truth. For those who believe that the bible is literally true will always be in opposition to those who believe it is to be interpreted in the light of a new era.

If the teachings of the bible on homosexuality are unchangeable because they are the word of God, there can be no flexibility on the view that homosexuality is a sin and must exclude homosexuals from the church.

If the teachings of the bible are viewed as culturally relative then there is no commitment to accepting the view that homosexuality is sinful. For example, OT teaching against homosexuality grows out of the need for a developing society to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ and wanting to distinguish between God’s people Israel, and the surrounding pagan nations, which practiced homosexuality within their religious cults.

The NT teachings are also aimed against pagan, libertine societies which had none of the Jewish traditions of the OT which already opposed homosexuality.

The biblical writers had no understanding of the biological causes of homosexuality.

Society’s morality has changed and religious morality must adapt to ensure that it is not seen as completely irrelevant.

Jesus made no pronouncements on homosexuality so we cannot make moral assertions based on what it is presumed his view would be.

The dilemma could be resolved if different Christian groups accepted that different position were equally valid. Unlikely!

Perhaps there is no real dilemma – in the UK homosexuality has not been criminal since 1967 and the civil partnerships act recognizes the legal status of homosexual...
partnerships. There is no violation of the law involved, so the dilemma is subjective. It is the same issue which is raised by abortion – it is legal and yet still considered immoral by some.

Consider: how far should Christians be obliged to favour homosexuals or to recognize their right to equal treatment in adoption or sex therapy, for example?

How far should groups such as the WBC be free to express their message?