Martin Davie helps us think about ‘adiaphora’ – things on which we can disagree.

There has been much talk lately of ‘agreeing to disagree’ on the issues of human sexuality in the church. In this article, I shall introduce three categories into which we can place matters on which there is disagreement within the church:  
• matters which are adiaphora  
• matters which are not adiaphora and on which the church cannot simply live with disagreement, and  
• matters which are not adiaphora and on which the church can live with disagreement.

Having introduced these categories, I shall conclude by asking which category the issue of human sexuality fits into.

Matters which are adiaphora
The term adiaphora is Greek in origin. It is a plural word which literally means ‘those things which are indifferent’. In this context ‘indifferent’ does not mean ‘uninterested’ (as in ‘he was indifferent about the result of the match’), but rather ‘morally neutral’.

The use of the term in this sense goes back to Stoic philosophy. According to the Stoics all the objects which human beings pursue during their lives can be divided into three classes. First, there are things which are good, such as virtue, wisdom, justice, temperance, and so forth. Secondly, there are things which are bad, such as vice, folly, injustice and intemperance. Thirdly, there are things such as wealth and fame which are in themselves neither good nor bad, but morally neutral and in that sense adiaphora.

In subsequent Christian theology this concept of some things being in themselves morally neutral has been taken over to refer to those things which are neither specifically commanded nor specifically prohibited by God. That is what is meant when Christian theologians talk about adiaphora.

There are some things which are commanded by God, such as keeping the Sabbath day holy or honouring one’s father and mother (Exodus 20:8–12). And there are some things which are prohibited by God, such as worshipping idols or committing adultery (Exodus 20:4–5, 14). Where there are such commands or prohibitions expressly given in Scripture, and where these commands are universally applicable (unlike many of the specific commands contained in the Old Testament Law), then Christians have a clear and absolute duty to obey them.

However, there are a lot of things in life which are not the subject of any such specific command or prohibition.

This can be seen if you think about the subject of breakfast. We are faced with lots of choices at breakfast time. What time should we have breakfast? Should we drink tea or coffee? Should we have porridge or Frosties? Should we have brown toast or white? Should we put marmalade or marmite on our toast? The list of such potential breakfast choices is almost endless and none of them can be resolved by a simple appeal to biblical guidance. As Richard Hooker argued in The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, if we wait for direct biblical guidance on such matters we are going to wait forever, because such guidance does not exist.

Adiaphora in the New Testament
In the New Testament the discussion of how to behave in relation to things that are adiaphora is to be found in three passages in the letters of Paul: Romans 14:1–15:13, 1 Corinthians 8:1–13, and 1 Corinthians 10:23–33 where the subject is discussed even though the word itself is not used.

In these passages Paul considers three issues which were troubling the churches in Rome and Corinth: Do Christians have to observe Jewish religious festivals? Is it right for Christians to eat...
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non-kosher food? And is it right for Christians to eat meat that has previously been offered to the pagan gods as part of temple sacrifices?

The answer that Paul gives is that the observance of Jewish festivals and the eating of food are matters that are adiaphora. This is because all food has been created by God and the Levitical restrictions on eating particular foods have been abolished under the new covenant along with the obligation to observe Jewish religious festivals. Like circumcision, these are things which were boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles and in the new covenant community consisting of both Jews and Gentiles they no longer need to be observed.

However, just because these matters are adiaphora does not mean that Christians can simply do what they like on these matters. There were Christians for whom observing Jewish festivals, not eating non-kosher food and not eating food associated with pagan idolatry were matters of religious importance. According to Paul, their convictions need to be taken seriously and other Christians who take a more permissive attitude should not abuse their freedom by acting in a way that would cause conscientious difficulties for their more conservative brothers and sisters.

John Calvin expresses the point well when he comments as follows:

‘In all cases we must study charity, and look to the edification of our neighbour. “All things are lawful for me,” says he, “but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth,”’ (1 Corinthians 10:23, 24). There is nothing plainer than this rule, that we are to use our liberty if it tends to the edification of our neighbour, but if inexpedient for our neighbour, we are to abstain from it.’ (Institutes, Bk III.19.12)

The overall lesson we learn from these Pauline passages is this point made by Calvin. In matters that are adiaphora ‘we must study charity, and look to the edification of our neighbour.’ What action by us will help them to flourish as God intends?

The issue of how to handle things which are adiaphora also came up at the Reformation, in the form of disputes about whether it was right for reformed Christians to continue to use the rites and ceremonies of the medieval church.

**Adiaphora at the Reformation**

This issue is addressed by Martin Luther in his 1520 treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*. The conclusion he comes to is that the question of whether to observe traditional ceremonies or not comes into the category of adiaphora. What really matters is not observance or non-observance, but the acceptance of justification by faith alone and the love of one’s neighbour.

The Anglican Reformers likewise addressed the issue of adiaphora. The position they took, laid down in Article VI and the Ordinal, is that Scripture ‘contains all things necessary for salvation’ and that therefore ‘whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.’ This position gave space for everything that is not specifically commanded or prohibited in Scripture to be regarded as adiaphora.

However, they did not regard such issues as an area where everyone could do as they liked. This was because they held that national churches (such as the Church of England) had the authority to decide on matters that were adiaphora (such as the use of vestments or particular liturgical forms). Such decisions should be obeyed by the members of that church in order to respect church order and the law of the land, and not create unnecessary difficulties for the consciences of other Christians (see Article XXIV).

It should be noted, however, that like Paul in the New Testament, the Anglican Reformers did not regard the basic moral law of the Old Testament (including what it says about sexual ethics) as coming under the category of adiaphora. Article VII makes this point clear.

In addition, in more recent Anglican discussion the Reformers’ emphasis on the freedom of national churches in regard to matters that are adiaphora has been qualified, due to the realisation that national churches need to have regard to the consequences.
of their actions for other churches. Thus the *Windsor Report* of 2004 says that the autonomy of local churches should not be seen as denoting ‘unlimited freedom’, but rather ‘freedom-in-relation’ – that is to say, freedom that is ‘subject to limits generated by the commitments of communion’. In consequence: ‘the very nature of autonomy itself obliges each church to have regard to the common good of the global Anglican community and the Church universal’ (*Windsor Report*, page 48).

In terms of biblical theology, this means that in the exercise of its freedom each national church needs to take seriously the Pauline teaching about the interdependence of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12–26.

**Matters that are not adiaphora**

Thus far I have introduced the category of *adiaphora*. I now want to move on to look at the two other categories I mentioned at the start: matters which are not *adiaphora* and on which the church cannot simply live with disagreement; and matters which are not *adiaphora* and on which the church can live with disagreement.

Turning to the first of these categories, the church of the Patristic period came to the conclusion that the church could not live with disagreement over how to understand what is in the Bible in relation to: the basic message of creation and salvation contained in the Creed; in relation to the inability of human beings to save themselves through their own moral effort; in relation to the Trinitarian nature of God; and in relation to the full humanity and divinity of Christ.

The reason it did not believe that Christians could interpret the Bible differently with regard to these matters was because salvation comes through faith and faith involves believing the biblical message of salvation – which in turn means believing in the God to whom that message bears witness, the Triune creator God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Right interpretation of the Bible on these matters was thus integral to right faith. This was in turn necessary for salvation. That is why it says in the Athanasian Creed, ‘This is the Catholick faith: which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.’

At the Reformation, the Anglican Reformers followed the lead of the Patristic Church in these matters (which is why they laid down what needed to be believed about them in Articles I–V, VII–X and XVII). They also emphasised the need for accepting the doctrine of justification by faith alone and for a right approach to the sacraments (see Articles XI–XIII and XXV–XXXI). Again this was out of a concern for salvation. As they saw it, a wrong reading of the Bible in relation to justification and the sacraments undermined salvation, because being saved meant accepting the message of justifying faith and receiving the sacraments rightly.

These are examples of where Christians have not believed they could live with disagreement in their interpretation of Scripture. However, there are also examples of my third category, matters on which Christians have felt they could live with disagreement on matters contained in the Bible.

My three examples of this are the question of the historicity of the story of Jonah, the question of the nature of everlasting punishment, and the question of whether women should be ordained.

All of these examples are matters which are not *adiaphora* because they concern what is laid down in Scripture. On these issues, all sides are agreed that Scripture teaches about them, but they disagree about what Scripture teaches. However, they are matters on which evangelicals have, by and large, felt able to live with difference.

The reason why this is the case is that it has been felt that these are not issues which are fundamental to salvation. It has been accepted that even if people interpret the Bible wrongly on these matters this does not mean that they cannot have faith in the biblical God and the biblical message about salvation, live a holy life before God, and attain to everlasting life.
Sex does not come under the category of matters about which we can simply agree to disagree about what the Bible says. This is because in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, right sexual conduct is a fundamental matter for God’s people.

Which category does sexuality come under?

Having introduced these three categories I want to finish by asking which category the issue of sexuality comes into.

To begin with I would argue that it does not come under the category of *adiaphora*. This is because it is impossible to read the Bible with any degree of attention and come to the conclusion that it says nothing about sex. It does.

The creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 tell us about how God instituted sex when he created the human race. The historical and prophetic books of the Bible give numerous examples of how sex goes wrong in a fallen world. Proverbs gives instruction about sexual conduct. The Song of Songs celebrates sex. The Decalogue and the Levitical laws regulate sex. And in the New Testament, the Gospels, the Epistles and Revelation all contain numerous examples of instruction and warning about sexual conduct.

I would further argue that sex does not come under the category of matters about which we can simply agree to disagree about what the Bible says. This is because in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, right sexual conduct is a fundamental matter for God’s people.

In the Old Testament, matters of sexual behaviour are seen as so important that those who transgress the God-given laws regarding sexual conduct deserve to be cut off from membership of God’s people through the application of the death penalty (see Leviticus 18 and 20).

In the New Testament, the Old Testament laws regarding sexual conduct are seen as still in place, and transgression of them is seen as a matter which needs to entail the transgressor being subject to disciplinary exclusion from membership of God’s people in this life (1 Corinthians 5). It also carries with it the danger of eternal separation from the life of God’s kingdom in the world to come (Matthew 5:27–30, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, Galatians 5:18–21, Revelation 21:8).

This being the case, we cannot say that a reading of the Bible which says that the biblical teaching about sexuality (abstinence outside marriage and fidelity within it) can be set aside today, or that it does not apply to a particular category of people (namely those with same-sex attraction), can be accepted as a reading which may be tolerated within the church, or as falling within the legitimate spectrum of biblical interpretation.

This is a matter on which there cannot be room for disagreement, because it is a matter which involves obedience to clear biblical teaching, on a matter which involves the salvation of people’s souls.

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