

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, HUMAN SEXUALITY AND THE CURRENT CULTURAL CRISIS

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Recent Synod Decisions

During the meetings of the Church of England's Synod this year (in February and July) some significant motions were carried on themes related to the Church's continuing debate about its stance on controversial issues to do with human sexuality.¹ The first was a refusal by the House of Clergy to “take note” of the 'Bishop's Report on 'Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations,' which basically reaffirmed the Church's consistent teaching that marriage (referred to as Holy Matrimony) should be confined to a life-long relationship between a man and a woman.

The second was a rejection by all Houses of Synod of the right of those, who freely wish to be relieved of their homosexual attraction, to seek therapy to this end. The third was to call on the House of Bishops to explore liturgical expressions of welcome to those who declare they have had their gender reassigned. Each decision, although it still does not commit the Church of England to a formal change of direction on homosexuality, brings it closer to a permanent rupture, thereby repeating the history of the Episcopal Church of the USA and the Episcopal Church in Scotland. It is not difficult to imagine that sectors in the Church of England will continue to bring unrelenting pressure to bear on the Church at all levels to declare that homosexual identity is a perfectly normal gift from God.

The Crucial Concern

The major question for the church is not so much over the legitimacy of homosexual acts or approval of the LGBT agenda, nor even just disagreement over God's pattern of sexuality for his creation, but whether to accept or exclude the normative authority of God's word. Changing the church's long understanding of what God's word demands in this case seems to be the straw that breaks the camel's back in a number of other instances² in which the clear, core elements of apostolic teaching, as revealed by the Holy Spirit, are either consistently misinterpreted or repudiated.

1 The title of the various motions and the votes cast in all three houses of Synod are set out in an Appendix to this paper.

2 One example would be evasive statements made on the truth that Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and humans.

These recent decisions by the Church of England Synod witness to a serious departure from foundational Anglican formularies, built on a careful and faithful interpretation of the text of Scripture. Followers of Jesus within the universal church are not free, therefore, to pick and choose what they are prepared to believe and do with respect to whatever God's word declares unequivocally is His will.

Jesus Christ and Culture

Dependable theological interpretation and application of God's word is intimately related to how the church intends to respond to key challenges to its message posed by contemporary culture. Human sexuality, because it penetrates deeply into the problem of what it means to be human, and how one perceives oneself, is one of the most pressing and critical existential questions of our time. It is a massive and complex subject.

There can be little doubt that Christians, who promote an approach to sexuality amenable to the consensus of current Western culture, by emphasising that one's view is simply a matter of individual choice, are following a path of cultural accommodation; what Richard Niebuhr, in his famous treatise on *Christ and Culture*, termed the 'Christ of Culture.' They have bought into some of the most basic convictions of the LGBT creed, without first applying a critique based on the teaching of Christ and the apostles. This view, when articulated theologically, presumes that to love one's LGBT neighbours means accepting their views, on the basis that God's love is unconditional. To the contrary, not adopting their views means rejecting them. This subjective conclusion on the meaning of love flows from a superficial view of *agape*; in fact, it tends to endorse *eros* as the standard meaning of love.³

The World

In theological terms, the approval of active same-sex relationships, even when they are settled, long-term and monogamous, indicates an endorsement of the New Testament concept of the world in its opposition to God's perfect purposes for humanity. Confronted by Pilate at his trial, Jesus makes it clear that the kingdom and kingship which he represents "is not of this world" (John 18:36):

"The New Testament is redolent with language that speaks of the reality of two kingdoms that offer completely contrasting states of affairs."⁴

Paul, for example, tells the Christians of Colossae that "the Father...has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:12-13). John on Patmos

3 As did Sigmund Freud, for example, in his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

4 J. Andrew Kirk, *The Church and the World: Understanding the Relevance of Mission* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014), p. 18. one example

tells his persecuted hearers that “the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ” (Rev. 11:15).

“The Christian community is to be careful not to yearn for the 'spirit of the world' once it has received 'the Spirit that is from God' (1 Cor. 2:12). It has to be careful how it reacts to 'the affairs of the world' (1 Cor. 7:33-34). This may mean that Christians must not assume that they need to conform to the expectations of people who still belong to this age, but must carry out their responsibilities according to the pattern of the new world shaped by the Spirit of Christ.”⁵

One could continue, citing passage after passage that confirms the truth that the present reality of the world is in substance astray from “God's good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2). It is, therefore, more than astonishing and disconcerting that church leaders are able to exchange what makes God's world wholesome, as he has ordered it, for beliefs and practices that contradict what is exemplary. If they believed the apostolic teaching, they would obey the injunction “not to be conformed to the pattern of this world” (Rom. 12:2).

When the Synod motion asks Synod to endorse the statement “that the practice of conversion therapy has no place *in the modern world*,” it is simply confirming the New Testament's plain teaching on the meaning of world in its negative sense.⁶ Of course conversion therapy has no place *in the modern world*, for the modern world is in conflict with the kingdom of Christ, and detests its king and his genuine followers:

“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John. 17:15-17)

The Church of England's Baptism Service

Where rather abstract theological reflection doesn't always seem to meet the point, liturgical material often clarifies belief. This is the case with the New Testament teaching on both the kingdom of this world and of the world that is arriving. The words that parents and godparents are called to make (prefaced by the decisive statement, “to follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him”): “to reject the devil”, “to renounce the deceit and corruption of evil”, “to repent of the sins that separate them from God,” “to submit to Christ as Lord” and “to renounce the world, the flesh and the devil,” all show that the church teaches a stark distinction between the two realities. The prayer asking that God will deliver those to be baptised “from the powers of darkness”, and the final statement that “God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and

⁵ *The Church and the World*, pp. 18-19.

⁶ The emphasised words are mine. In a recent pronouncement, Justine Greening, the British Education Secretary, has said that churches are not “part of a modern country” if they do not perform same-sex marriages. If the 'modern country' is defined by those adhering to the “age that is passing away,” then churches should welcome the fact that they are not part of it!

given us a place with the saints in light” point in the same direction.

Finally, the proclamation that, through the cross and resurrection, God has given us, in his amazing grace and mercy, the unique gift of “dying to the past and rising to new life,” affirms the same truths. Through the commitments made in baptism, according to the Church of England, God has placed us in the new community which represents his new order – the kingdom of Jesus. Very distressingly, the faction in the Church of England that approves the LGBT agenda, in this case, represents the kingdom of darkness, not the kingdom of God.

Transgender people

The motion about welcoming and affirming transgender people suggests by implication that those, who do not accept the reality that choosing to change one's gender is a legitimate moral choice, neither welcome nor affirm those who have undergone gender reassignment. A church that seeks to follow the teaching and practice of Jesus of course welcomes *anyone who comes into its midst*. True to its calling, it would *welcome* murderers, sex-offenders, those who oppress the poor, and so on. However, it would *not affirm* them, if that means accepting their beliefs, actions or life-styles; quite the contrary. Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question about the woman caught committing adultery is a brilliant reaction to the distinction between welcoming and affirming; “neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John. 8:11). In the case of those who suffer gender-dysphoria, the loving action to take is to affirm them in the gender with which they were born, because this is how they were created, and to strive for the total recognition and implementation of sexual equality. To designate oneself as belonging to the opposite gender to the original one of conception and birth cannot change their sexual uniqueness fundamentally.⁷

The age that is passing away and the church's prophetic ministry

The advocacy of self-proclaimed rights for people who wish to adhere to active homosexual

7 A Dutch psychiatrist, van den Aardweg, with many years' experience treating homosexual individuals, strongly criticises the argument that everyone has “the right to be who they are,” implying that if a man or a woman does not feel comfortable in their birth sex then they should be free to undergo medical procedures to change it. However, “there is no evidence at all that transsexuals have hereditary or other physical or physiological anomalies,” the psychologist noted. “Biologically, they ‘are’ normal boys and girls, men and women.”

In his experience of counselling transgender people, the “compulsive transgender crave, like many neurotic obsessions and immature passions, is resistant to change,” and “will be alive as long as the person is in the grip of his feelings of his gender-inferiority complex as a desperate wishful fantasy. It is not changed or satisfied by hormonal or surgical interventions.” These may lead to an “initial euphoria,” but that will give way to “renewed dissatisfaction, restlessness and depression.” The logical conclusion must be that *the most caring disposition* towards such people should be to affirm them in their original sex-identity. See, Lianne Laurence, 'Psychologist condemns Ontario plan to provide sex-reassignment surgery as an 'act of inhumanity,' ' *Life Site News*, Friday, July 14, 2017 (the emphasis is mine).

alliances or to change their gender (their sex, of course, is immutable) is a feature of what the apostle Paul calls, “a message of the wisdom of this age...(which) none of the rulers of this age understood...,for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory”(1 Cor. 2:6,8). It is because the distinction between the two kingdoms is being thoroughly blurred by some church leaders that, in an attempt (presumably) to reach out to the current self-indulgent, secular generation, a truly prophetic ministry is being lost within the Christian community. As one of the theologians of liberation, Juan Luis Segundo, put it succinctly and perceptively some decades ago, “one has to hear the bad news, before the good news of salvation makes any sense.” God's prophetic message of judgement, beginning with the church, on all that hinders human beings from becoming transformed people of God, through turning to Christ as Saviour and Lord, is good news, precisely because it identifies the destructive power of sin.

What of the future?

I have attempted a very brief review of what, it seems to me, is the most fitting New Testament material which speaks to the present situation on sexuality and ideological dogmas, as it is being presented by some influential people in the higher echelons of the Church of England. It represents core, dominical and apostolic teaching and makes it seriously reprehensible for followers of Jesus to advocate, whether directly or indirectly, LGBT alleged rights.

If the latter is the way that the decision-making body of the Church of England is inclined to go, then it has lost touch with what the New Testament teaches about the nature and behaviour of the world as a realm which rejects God's project of a new world and chooses to believe its own dogmas. I would suggest that this is a kind of death-wish, a bartering of the soul in exchange for the approbation of 'the spirits' who control the affairs of this age (Gal. 4: 8-9; Col. 2:20-22). As has been demonstrated in the case of the Episcopal Church of the USA, this determination is no recipe for halting a declining Church. Unless the Church of England reverses the direction in which it is going and sets out again on the path of genuine holiness (Isa. 35:8-10; Rom. 6:19; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 4:24; Heb. 12:14), its future will become increasingly dismal.

In the present cultural climate, advocating the reign of Jesus Christ above “all rule and authority, power and dominion” (Eph. 1:21), is likely to bring as a consequence opposition, harassment, discrimination, injustice and repression. It is already happening. At the same time, those Christian communities, committed to challenging the false wisdom of this world and proclaiming the delighting of belonging to God's kingdom, are those which often are growing.

However, having contended for the clear teaching of Jesus and the apostles as the absolute standard by which his disciples must live, the present cultural crisis must still be handled with extreme sensitivity and appropriateness. I think Christians, where non-Christians are concerned, can

subscribe to a position on same-sex attachment that says something like this: we recognise that there are people of the same sex who have formed a profound friendship, which they have not been able to make with a person of the opposite sex, and wish to live together. It is not the business of the state to interfere in such a relationship: either to make it unlawful (because sexual intimacy may be assumed to be part of the friendship), to give it some special credence by giving it specific legal recognition or to promote the relationship through the educational system. Society does have an obligation to ensure that such a relationship is free from intimidation.

Same sex affinity and affection can be a beautiful relationship, without it being exclusive or sexualised, or having to be elevated into some kind of special standing within the law. David and Jonathan might be an example of such an alliance from the history of God's people (though not implying active sexual acts). It would be wrong, however, for Christians to dignify such a friendship with the designation of civil partnership or marriage, by supporting the current situation.

It might be sobering, in the light of New Testament teaching, to allow the Polish, ex-Marxist philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski (not someone known as an avowed Christian) to have a final word, that aptly sums up the current state of affairs in the Western world:

“That there are few (Christians), however, is not a symptom of any 'crisis' of Christianity, but confirmation of something it says about itself: that it is difficult to measure up to its demands. If there is a crisis, it is a permanent one; it is an indispensable way of being for Christianity, or perhaps an expression of the more general and universal 'crisis' in which we all find ourselves, having been driven out of paradise.”⁸

*Andrew Kirk has spent much of his life teaching theological subjects in tertiary educational institutions in Argentina and England. He has also taught courses on all six continents. In England, he has been on the staff of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, the Selly Oak Colleges and the University of Birmingham. Since retirement he has been involved, on a part-time basis, with graduate institutes in Eastern Europe, Canada and the United Kingdom, mainly supervising students doing research degrees in the field of missiology. His doctorate is from the Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He is the author of many books. The most recent are *What is Mission: Theological Explorations?* *Mission under Scrutiny: Confronting Current Challenges*; *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith : Following Modernity and Post-Modernity*; *Civilisations in Conflict? Islam, the West and Christian Faith*, and *The Church and the World: Understanding the Relevance of Mission*. In the early 1990's he was a member of the Faith and Order Advisory Group and Mission Theology Advisory Group for General Synod. He is married, with three children and three grandchildren.*

8 'On the So-Called Crises of Christianity' in *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 94.

Appendix

Motion voted on in General Synod at its meeting in February, 2017:

“That the Synod do take note of this Report ('Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations: A Report from the House of Bishops' (GS 2055))

House of Bishops – in favour 43, against 1;

House of Clergy - in favour 93, against 100 (with 2 abstentions)

House of Laity - in favour 106, against 83.

The motion was not carried.

Motion voted on in General Synod at its meeting in July, 2017:

“That Synod endorse the statement of 16 January 2017, signed by the UK Council for Psychotherapy, the Royal College of General Practitioners and others 'that the practice of conversion therapy has no place in the modern world, is unethical, harmful and not supported by evidence;' “Call upon the Archbishops' Council to become a co-signatory to the statement on behalf of the Church of England ('Conversion Therapy' (GS 2010A and 2070 B)).

House of Bishops – in favour 35, against 1 (with 2 abstentions)

House of Clergy - in favour 142, against 25 (with 7 abstentions)

House of Laity - in favour 165, against 20 (with abstentions).

The motion was carried.

Motion voted on in the same Synod in July, 2017:

“That the Synod call upon the Church to be sensitive to, and to listen to contemporary expressions of gender identity; and call on the government to ban the practice of Conversion Therapy.”

House of Bishops – in favour, 36, against 1

House of Clergy - in favour 135, against 25 (with 13 abstentions)

House of Laity - in favour 127, against 48 (with 13 abstentions).

The motion was carried.

Motion voted on in the same Synod in July, 2017:

“That this Synod, recognising the need for transgender people to be welcomed and affirmed in their parish church, call on the House of Bishops to consider whether some nationally commended liturgical materials might be prepared to mark a person's gender transition.” ('Welcoming Transgender People' (GS 2071A and 2071B))

House of Bishops - in favour 30, against 2 (with 2 abstentions)

House of Clergy - in favour 127, against 28 (with 16 abstentions)

House of Laity - in favour 127, against 48 (with 8 abstentions).

The motion was carried.