

Response to the recent C of E decision about blessing gay marriage

One of the main challenges facing many churches today is the issue of approving same-sex relationships and the matter of same-sex marriage. It is affecting the Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed churches together with Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopal Church and others. How should we respond?

Obviously, we have to take it seriously. If we don't take the right approach this could undermine our prayer and preparation for Revival.

On the other hand, the issue is a motive for prayer for Revival. If we believe the Bible disapproves of same-sex relationships, we will see the issue as requiring divine intervention to correct it. The trend is such a strong one in society and in various churches.

PRIORITIES IN OUR RESPONSE

The priorities in our approach should be:

To pray seriously for Revival to correct this trend.

I don't think this needs further comment. Prayer for Revival is what the Network is all about.

To understand and act upon the Biblical teaching about homosexual relationships

You may find it helpful to read my papers on the issue in my Christian Teaching Website [Church Issues – Christian Teaching Resources](#) using the hyperlinks below:

[What does the Bible say on homosexual practice? \(pdf\)](#)

[Are arguments that the Bible accepts homosexual relationships similar to those that it approves women church leaders?](#)

[Homosexuality and the Church: A study guide \(pdf\)](#)

[What about gay marriage?](#)

[Critique of Methodist report on homosexual relationships](#)

[Critique of Methodist study guide on same-sex marriage report](#)

[Comments on the C of E Report *Living in Love and Faith*](#)

To love our homosexual neighbour.

God commands us to love our neighbour whatever his/her sexuality, race, religion, nationality social standing. We are called to love all our neighbours equally. The Bible is clear that not to do so is a serious sin. In fact, God says that if we don't love them, we don't love him. We must love our homosexual neighbour as ourselves. I have always sought to show a loving attitude to homosexuals. I have had extensive dialogue with them. However, nowhere does the Bible say we should be tolerant of homosexual practice.

WHAT HAS THE GENERAL SYNOD DECIDED?

There needs to be a clear distinction between approving of close celibate friendship between homosexual people and approving a sexually active relationship between two homosexual people. The former is acceptable from a biblical point of view. The latter is not (see my articles referenced above). But the synod has not kept this very important distinction. It is at pains to say it has not changed the traditional, biblical view of heterosexual marriage. But it has, in practice, approved of sexual relationships between homosexual people.

The synod states that they “endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England.” All this means is that it has not approved marriage in church between homosexual people. But **it has approved the blessing in church of homosexual civil relationships which are sexual relationships. It has also approved the blessing of homosexual couples (who must be married outside the church).**

An amendment that the new official prayers “should not be used so as to indicate or imply affirmation of sexually active relationships outside Holy Matrimony or to invoke God’s blessing on such relationships” — was lost.

It is quite clear that the synod has approved committed, sexually-active, homosexual relationships. But some people seem to think it hasn’t. The blessing is clearly connected to that sexual relationship, whether it is a civil relationship or a marriage. It is not just a general blessing. It is special pleading to claim that such a blessing does not clearly approve the sexual relationship.

It is clearly mistaken to think that God will bless behaviour which Scripture teaches is wrong. The crucial issue is that we cannot bless what scripture says is sin without approving it. If we do bless a relationship which Scripture says is sinful, we approve a sin for which Jesus died. This is a primary issue for us.

Here are some relevant comments about the Synod decision:

The Archbishop of York, said on BBC Radio 4 “I’m really pleased that we now will be able to bless same-sex couples who are faithfully living in a civil marriage or a civil partnership, in church.”

George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, said that the church has moved “out of step” with the Bible.

A group of six lawyers who sit on the General Synod wrote “Offering Prayers of Love and Faith for any couple who are living as a married couple (whether in a civil marriage or not) while they are not in a relationship of Holy Matrimony implies approval of their marriage-like relationship and risks creating confusion over the Church’s doctrine of marriage. It is also indicative of a departure from that doctrine.”

The Church of England Communications Team wrote in the official C of E Daily Media Digest, on 11.04.23, referring to a secular newspaper article: “Further coverage following the General Synod welcome in February for proposals which would enable same-sex couples to come to church after a civil marriage or civil partnership to give thanks, dedicate their relationship to God and receive God’s blessing.”

Theologian David Bennett commented “As a gay, celibate Christian, I am heartbroken by the CofE’s approval of same-sex blessings ... I sit today, crushed and in deep pain for the church I love, and which I called a safe home. I lived sacrificially within the Church of England’s teaching and trusted its word as a celibate gay Christian ... What we are seeing today is the undoing of the Reformation in the Church of England, and global Protestantism, where scripture is no longer the ultimate authority for discipleship.”

The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA), which claims to speak for 75% of Anglicans worldwide, said that the C of E had “departed from the historic faith” and disqualified itself as the “mother church” of the Anglican communion. The statement, signed by 10 primates, said: “The GSFA is no longer able to recognise the present archbishop of Canterbury, the Rt Hon & Most Revd Justin Welby, as the ‘first among equals’ leader of the global communion.” GSFA Chairman and Archbishop of South Sudan, The Most Revd Dr Justin Badi, branded the bishops’ report on sexual ethics as a “farcical compromise,” devoid of any supporting theological argument. He added: “What the English bishops are recommending constitutes unfaithfulness to the God who has spoken through His written word ... They are re-writing God’s law for His creation; laws that are re-affirmed by Christ in the Gospel accounts.”

WHAT DOES THE NT TEACH ON SEPARATION FROM SERIOUS ERROR?

The New Testament encourages separation from those who persist in error. It refers to people who persist in sinful behaviour, which may not seem relevant to those who deliberately, or de facto, support homosexual behaviour. But it is a sin to approve something Scripture says is wrong, and especially to encourage the church to do the same.

Jesus himself says: “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Mt 18:15-17).

Paul similarly teaches that we should not associate with someone who does not live according to biblical teaching: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people” (Rom 16:17-18).

He writes similarly to the Thessalonians “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer” (2 Thess 3:6, 14).

He also writes: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them” (Titus 3:10).

So, Jesus and Paul urge us to separate from people who persist in sin, and that includes people who persist in approving behaviour disapproved of by Scripture.

But, how do we do this in practice? I will address this question in an Anglican context, because that is where I have extensive experience.

RESPONDING TO THE ISSUE PRACTICALLY

The above biblical passages each speak of not associating with a person who persists in seriously unbiblical behaviour or unbiblical teaching. The context would have been the local church, since there were no denominations in those days. They don’t speak of leaving the church in order to separate from such people, although that could sometimes be necessary. I am aware that radical separation such as looking for new episcopal oversight or leaving the denomination is very difficult, especially for clergy still in office in the C of E, because it seriously affects their future and, of course, their congregation.

But we do need to think prayerfully what separation means practically for us, because we must honour the Lord and his Word. Not to do so would also harm the church (and hinder prayer and preparation for Revival). I hope this paper will help with that prayerful thinking. I don’t think it can be right to do nothing.

There are various ways of separating from this serious error. I’m not saying my list is complete. These are actions I am aware of but there may be other acceptable actions. I’d quite like to hear about them.

FOR LAY PEOPLE AND RETIRED CLERGY

- Some lay people may leave the Church of England. Some retired clergy may do this too. Others would think it acceptable to stay in a local church led by a Minister who does not agree with the Synod decision.
- Some retired clergy might discontinue having Permission to Officiate and so have no bishop overseeing them.

FOR CLERGY STILL IN FULL OR PART TIME CHURCH LEADERSHIP

- The basic action for such clergy is surely to express definite disapproval of the General Synod decision to their bishop if he or she voted in favour of it (some didn’t). If possible, it would be good to ask to be under the oversight of an assistant bishop who doesn’t agree with the synod decision, if there is one locally.

The Church of England has already appointed a provincial episcopal visitor (PEV), popularly known as a flying bishop, for clergy and laity who, for theological reasons, are unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests. This provision could be requested for the who, for theological reasons, are unable to receive the ministry of bishops who have voted in favour of the sexuality motion. This has not yet happened, but it should be done and hopefully some people will campaign for it. [I find myself wondering, in the meantime, whether clergy and congregations opposed to the General Synod decision could ask for oversight from these bishops anyway, assuming the bishop concerned also opposes the decision].

- Some clergy and congregations who feel more radical reaction is required may seek alternative episcopal oversight instead of their diocesan bishop who has voted in favour of the General Synod motion. Alternative episcopal oversight could be provided by the following linked organisations:

GAFCON (Anglican Network in Europe; Anglican Mission in England)

The Global Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (branded as Gafcon) is a communion of conservative Anglican churches that formed in 2008 for the benefit of clergy and others who oppose the blessing of same-sex unions.

The English group within ANIE, Anglican Mission in England, currently overseas 25 Anglican churches throughout England, from the South Coast to Newcastle. It is not able to oversee churches which remain in the Church of England, but is an alternative Anglican church in the UK.

Relevant websites:

[Home | GAFCON](#)

[Anglican Network in Europe](#)

[Home - Anglican Mission in England](#)

Other initiatives:

- A group of church leaders in the Diocese of London have formed a new deanery chapter for those who oppose the General Synod decision. It is led by Phil Martin, the vicar of St Botolph's, Aldersgate in central London, who will serve as the Area Dean. This is controversial in the diocese. All London clergy are invited to join. Contact phil.martin@aldersgatetalks.org
- St Helen's Bishopsgate in London has announced that following much prayer and reflection it is in "a state of broken partnership with the House of Bishops of the Church of England." "St Helen's is not leaving the Church of England and will remain a member of its Deanery and Diocesan structures for the most part. However, St Helen's will be withdrawing from those activities which indicate full spiritual partnership." The vicar has arranged oversight from a (retired) provincial episcopal visitor - Bishop Rod Thomas. See <https://www.st-helens.org.uk/about/announcements/cofe/>
- The Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) has stated "We will continue to work alongside evangelicals across the country, who today share our sense of great sadness and dismay, to contend for biblical faithfulness and to live lives that Jesus has called us to. We are grateful that several speakers noted the need for some kind of settlement, though this would need to be without theological compromise. We believe that putting in place new imaginative structures, 'good differentiation,' is the only way we are going to be able to reach a settled outcome, that maintains the highest degree of unity possible within the Church of England and the Anglican Communion." See [CEEC responds on the back of General Synod vote - The Church of England Evangelical Council](#)
- Great Chesham parish church is in the process of deciding to withhold its annual contribution of £235,000 to the diocese of Oxford in protest over the General Synod decision.

FINALLY

Whatever action we take, we should, of course, show love to and pray for the local Anglican church (as all other churches) and pray for God to bring Revival to it.

God bless you as your prayerfully consider this issue.

Tony Higton