

Guarding the Deposit: Apostolic Truth for an Apostolic Church

The Church of England as an Apostolic Church

The Church of England defines itself as ‘apostolic.’ Thus, Canon A1 states ‘The Church of England, established according to the laws of this realm under the Queen’s Majesty, belongs to the true and apostolic Church of Christ.’

This is an essential hallmark of its identity—as it were, a key ingredient in its ‘trust deed’ or foundation-charter—from which it could only depart to its great detriment and in contradiction to its true self. Moreover, it sees its bishops as effectively ‘apostolic guardians’ to ensure the Church maintains not just the apostles’ doctrine, but their ‘faith, life and mission’. Guarding the Deposit is an appeal to the bishops and to the wider Church of England to do just that.

The Apostles and sexual ethics

Key New Testament texts such Matt. 5:27-32, 19:3-9, 1 Cor. 7:1-4, 1 Thess. 4:1-8, Eph. 5:21-33, and Heb. 13:4, show us that the Apostles followed Jesus in teaching a sexual ethic, rooted in the teaching of the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, that held that Christian believers should practise sexual fidelity within marriage and sexual abstinence outside it, and that marriage, which is a permanent and exclusive relationship between one man and one woman, should be patterned on the relationship of self-giving love between Christ and His Church.

The apostolic witness in the New Testament further tells us that un-repentant sexual sin (including same sex sexual relationships) will separate people from the life of God’s kingdom in the world to come (Matt. 5:27-30, 1 Cor. 6:9-11, Gal. 5:18-21, Rev. 21:8). Moreover, the Church should make a separation in this world between the people of God and those who practise sexual immorality or who teach others to do the same (1 Cor. 5: 1-13, Rev. 2:19-23).

In sum, the apostles’ teaching focused both on doctrine and ethics; within this they had a strong sexual ethic which they saw as an essential part of their message, and thus gave severe warnings about compromise in this area. That apostolic teaching was then entrusted to certain people—to the church’s presbyters and, in particular, to bishops—who had a solemn responsibility and role within the institution of the Church to pass on this ‘trust’ to future generations. Through successive generations in the era of the early church bishops had a key function in defending the Apostolic Faith—a role which has been passed on ever since and which they are expected to fulfil today.

The teaching of the Church of England

The teaching of the Church of England and the House of Bishops on sexual ethics is in line with the apostolic witness of sexual fidelity within marriage and sexual abstinence outside it. This can be seen in four key places, Canon B.30, the General Synod motion on sexual ethics of November 1987, the House of Bishops 1991 teaching document *Issues in Human Sexuality* and Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference.

The teaching of the Church of England, as seen in these official statements, means in terms of practice that the Church of England does not officially permit marriages between two people of the same sex, nor the blessing of same-sex unions, nor the ordination of those in sexually active same-sex relationships.

Options for the future

Under pressure from the widespread acceptance of same sex relationships in our society the Church of England is under pressure to reconsider its position. There are three basic options:

Option I: Maintaining the Church of England's current teaching and practice.

Option II: Adopting recommendation 17 of the 2013 *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (the 'Pilling' report), that: 'a priest with the agreement of the relevant PCC, should be free to mark the formation of permanent same sex relationship in a public service but should be under no obligation to do so.'

Option III: Declaring that permanent, faithful same-sex relationships are a legitimate form of Christian discipleship; and that therefore the Church should allow same-sex marriages to be conducted in its churches; and that being in a sexually active same-sex relationship should no longer be a bar to the exercise of ordained ministry.

The best way forward from an orthodox perspective would be for the Church of England to agree to retain apostolic continuity by maintaining its current position ('Option I'). If either of the two other options were to be pursued, a division of the Church of England would be required to prevent continuing conflict over sexuality within the Church and in order that those who remained orthodox would visibly separate from error, maintain a distinctive and permanent witness to the apostolic teaching and practice and remain united with other orthodox Anglicans around the globe.

Forms of differentiation

There are a number of forms differentiation might take:

- A. A third province for those wanting to pursue option II or III
- B. Two overlapping provinces with orthodox clergy and parishes in Canterbury and those wanting to pursue options II and III in York
- C. A third province for those wanting to maintain the apostolic witness.
- D. A society or association for clergy and parishes loyal to the apostolic witness with oversight from orthodox bishops through delegated episcopal ministry.
- E. Delegated episcopal ministry from orthodox bishops for orthodox clergy and parishes, but without the formation of a society.
- F. The departure of those loyal to the apostolic witness from the Church of England to join another church inside or outside the Anglican Communion

In regard to F the key question would be whether it would still be right to be associated with a Church of England that had departed from the apostolic witness on such a crucial issue. If the answer to that question was 'yes' the question would become whether remaining in the Church of England would give opportunities for continuing gospel ministry that would otherwise be lost.

When considering A –E the question that needs to be asked is which of them would (1) provide the clearest differentiation from those who had departed from the apostolic witness, (2) would be achievable in practice, (3) would be most likely to maintain a long term apostolic witness within the Church of England, and (4) would provide the fairest and most equitable form of division for both sides of the disagreement over sexuality.

A time of Krisis

The next few months will be a strategic season in the life of the Church. To use two New Testament words, this is a time both of *krisis* (a 'crisis' requiring critical judgement) and of *kairos* (a new 'time' requiring creative new thinking).

The time has therefore come when all those clergy and parishes who wish the Church of England to remain loyal to the apostolic witness to make that fact known. This is also the time to pray earnestly to the Lord of the Church, that she may be spared during this time of crisis and that the godly will be protected. There will be a need for great wisdom and great courage; but also for renewed confidence in the Jesus who promised that he would build his Church—the community of people who are faithful in their confession of him—and that the gates of death would never prevail against her (Matt. 16:18).