

Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church in Wales

The Bishops of the Church in Wales have now issued a 'Pastoral Letter....to all the faithful concerning gay and lesbian Christians' accompanied by two sets of prayers 'that may be said with a couple following the Celebration of a Civil Partnership or Civil Marriage.'

What should we make of this letter from a theological perspective?

First, the reasons the bishops give for not changing the teaching of the Church in Wales in relation to marriage or permitting 'the celebration of public liturgies of blessing for same sex unions' are because a process of consultation has shown there is not the necessary support in the Church in Wales to do so and because to do so would be to go against the recent statement from the Primates of the Anglican Communion. These are good reasons, but they do not get to the theological heart of the matter.

The fundamental theological reason why the Church in Wales should not change its teaching and practice is because the Bible makes clear (Genesis 1-2, Mark 10:2-9) that God has created human beings as male and female and has created marriage as a lifelong exclusive relationship between one man and one woman and as the sole legitimate context for entering into sexual union.

Secondly, the bishops introduce an element of provisionality into their position by saying that they cannot support change 'at this time.' This is presumably because the necessary majority for change might develop in the Church in Wales and the Anglican Communion might also alter its position and if this were the case the bishops would then feel free to support a change in the Church's teaching and practice. However, because the Church's current teaching and practice reflects the way that God has created human beings and created marriage it can never rightly be changed regardless of what a majority in the Church in Wales might want or what the Anglican Communion might decide. What God has created does not alter because of changes in human opinion.

Thirdly, both in the title of their letter and in its contents the bishops refer to people who are 'gay and lesbian.' Theologically this is a mistake because to describe people as gay and lesbian is to misrepresent their true identity. As the St Andrew's Day Statement of 1995 puts it: 'There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality of Christ' and within the reality of Christ people are either male or female and, if they are Christians, they are those who have died and risen with Christ and have been washed, justified and sanctified in his name and by his Spirit (Romans 6:1-11, 1 Corinthians 6:11).

The claim that people are gay and lesbian is incompatible with both of these realities and is therefore a claim that Christians should not recognise. There are of course people who experience same sex-attraction, who engage in same-sex activity, and who enter into same-sex unions. However, these are what they experience and what they do. They do not define who they are and to suggest otherwise is misleading and also unhelpful to the people concerned because by implication it rules out any possibility of change in their patterns of desire or behaviour.

Fourthly, the bishops join with the Anglican Primates in condemning 'homophobic prejudice and violence.' Prejudice, defined by the dictionary as 'preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience' resulting in 'dislike, hostility, or unjust behaviour,' is always wrong, as are all forms of unwarranted violence. Furthermore they remain wrong even when caused by opposition to same-sex attraction and behaviour (which is what the use of 'homophobic' implies). However, this does not mean that there is anything wrong with such opposition, nor does it mean that such opposition inevitably results in prejudice or violence. Any implication to the contrary is itself a form of prejudice in the sense of not being based on 'reason or actual experience.' There is nothing in reason or experience to suggest that those who

believe that same-sex attraction and behaviour are contrary to God's will therefore necessarily engage in prejudice or violence, or encourage it in others.

Fifthly, the bishops are entirely correct to commit to offering those with same-sex attraction and in same-sex relationships 'the same loving service and pastoral care to which all humanity is entitled.' However, to truly love someone and to offer them genuine pastoral care means seeking to help them to become the people God wants them to be and among other things this means helping them to live lives of sexual holiness involving sexual faithfulness within marriage and sexual abstinence outside it. According to the witness of the Bible and the universal tradition of the Christian Church same-sex sexual activity is incompatible with such holiness. It is contrary to God's law (1 Timothy 1:10), it is a manifestation of humanity's rebellion against God (Romans 1:26-27) and it excludes people from God's kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

The bishops are likewise correct to say that the Church needs to provide a 'safe space' in which people with same-sex attraction can be 'honest and open, respected and affirmed.' However, this does not mean that that the Church needs to affirm their attraction or those relationships which stem from it. What the Church needs to be is a place where people can be honest and open about having feelings which are contrary to God's will and where they can be respected and affirmed as people as they learn to deal with them in a godly fashion.

Sixthly, because the traditional Christian teaching about sexual holiness is rooted in the clear teaching of Scripture it is not something about which there can be, as the bishops suggest, 'honest and legitimate differences.' Views which are contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture are never legitimate however honestly they may be held.

Seventhly, the two forms of prayer for use after Civil Partnerships and Civil Marriages are problematic for three reasons.

- a. Although these prayers are not blessings in the technical sense of being 'the authoritative pronouncement of God's favour, they are nevertheless prayers of blessing in the sense of being prayers which asks for God's favour to rest upon the people involved and their relationships. Such prayers are wrong in principle if God is being asked to bless forms of activity which he has declared to be sinful and that is true here since what is being prayed for is same-sex relationships which, for the reasons outlined above, are contrary to the way God has created human beings and to the holiness which is God's gift and calling to his people.
- b. By authorising the use of these prayers the bishops are shifting the position of the Church in Wales, even though this has not been agreed by the Church's governing body. They are not in fact respecting the 'range of views' in the Church on this matter, but unilaterally imposing their own convictions.
- c. Most importantly, and contrary to what the bishops suggest, these prayers do not respond to the real 'pastoral need' of those who have entered in same-sex unions. As we have said, genuine pastoral care involves helping people to become the people God wants them to be and offering prayers which imply that same-sex unions are in line with God's will and that he will bless them will hinder rather than help this process. This is because if you give people the message that same-sex unions are acceptable in God's sight you will necessarily discourage them from thinking that they are something which they need to repent of and depart from. You are reinforcing them in a sinful pattern of life.

What all this means is that what the Welsh bishops have put forward is deeply flawed theologically and as such does not provide a model for the Church of England to follow.

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