

Gospel, Church & Marriage

Preserving Apostolic Faith and Life

As members of the Church of England Evangelical Council (“CEEC”) within the Church of England and the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, we offer this reflection out of our deep love for the Church of England, the wider Anglican Communion, and the world we want to serve.

As we face many changes in British society and forceful challenges within the Church of England on matters of human sexuality and marriage, we believe it is important not simply to focus on these contentious areas of disagreement but to set them within a wider and deeper theological vision. Our desire is for the Church’s teaching and practice to offer a vision of human flourishing which is faithful to Scripture.

This vision begins with God’s good purposes for us all as human beings and His plan to bring these purposes to birth in His world through the gospel of His forgiveness and grace, revealed in Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the power of the Spirit by Christ’s apostles. This good news creates and shapes a holy people who are called to believe it, live it, guard it, and share it with others. Together, we are called to worship the Triune God, *the source of grace* who ‘has created all things, and us in His own image’ and from whom comes ‘all life, truth, holiness and beauty’.¹

Scripture reveals that the Creator’s passionate longing is for human flourishing and the good of all. He works to bless all nations through His people (Gen. 12:3). The laws God gave to Israel were His gracious gift (‘for your good’: Deut. 10:13) designed to create a healthy society that would reflect God’s holiness and goodness, His justice and compassion. The prophets called Israel back to this way of life in obedience to God and away from idolatry, injustice and immorality so that she could be ‘a light to the nations’ (Isa. 42:1-6). Likewise the Church, rooted in the apostles’ teaching, is called by Jesus to be ‘salt and light’ in the world (Matt. 5:13-16). The Gospel shines into the darkness of our fallen hearts and cultures, and gives us the transforming knowledge of God’s mercy and grace in the face of Jesus Christ.

We long for all to hear and believe this message—of God’s unmerited grace and mercy shown to us all as sinful people through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord (1 John 4:10; Eph. 2:1-10) – and, in particular, for the people of England to come under the loving rule of Christ and so to discover the life-changing goodness of this ‘amazing grace’ for themselves.

The presenting divisive issues in the Church surrounding marriage and sex, and our society’s movement away from Christian teaching in this area, must not distract us from working towards that goal. Yet neither can they be ignored or treated as having no bearing on how this is achieved. In order to discern how to respond to these specific matters, we must first recall and re-commit ourselves to the gospel and its purpose as revealed in Scripture:

- i. Through His Son and by His Spirit, God is working within human history and across all cultures to rescue His creation from sin and to transform the lives of Jesus’ followers so that we embody His positive, life-enhancing purposes for all people.

¹ This and later non-biblical quotations and the italicised references to grace are all taken from the CEEC Basis of Faith which has influenced this statement with its beautiful encapsulation of major gospel truths as being all ‘*of grace*’.

- ii. The Church is God's gift, sign and instrument of the restoration of His creation, and is the foretaste of His new creation that is breaking in. This in turn requires us to consider what it means for the Church to have integrity as the body of Christ by remaining rooted in God's grace and being shaped by the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption and future hope.
- iii. In awaiting the final judgment and the fulfilment of God's good purposes, the Church must – at all times and in all places – faithfully obey the apostles' teaching on the pattern of faith and life that we are called to in Christ. This includes their teaching on marriage and singleness.

Only when we have received what the apostles have to say to us in each of these three areas and uncovered the deeper biblical truths that are at stake in this debate can we draw conclusions as to the necessary shape of apostolic faith and life today and what that means for our way forward as Anglicans within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

A. Apostolic Insistence on the Gospel's Purpose

As God's grace and truth prepare us for Christ's return as the *triumph of grace over all the effects of sin*, His will is that all who come under Christ's rule should turn from sin and be sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3). In this way, the true nature of God's holy purposes in the gospel are revealed to the world.

The apostolic gospel proclaimed the *work of grace*: that God, revealing His glory in human form, demonstrated His holy love and His opposition to all sin by redeeming His creation and rescuing humanity through Christ and His atoning death and glorious resurrection (Gal. 1:4; 1 John 4:10; Rom. 3:21-26). Christ had thus 'given himself' in dying on the cross with the express purpose 'to purify for himself a people, eager to do what is good' (Titus 2:14, *cf.* Rom 7:4). The gospel, as proclaimed by the apostles, had the goal and purpose—as well as the power—to transform people's lives into the likeness of Christ (Eph. 2:8-10; 1 Jn. 3:2-10; Rom. 8:29).

The apostles proclaimed that the 'grace of God has appeared', not only to affirm and redeem our created humanity and bring us forgiveness but also to 'train us to say "No" to all ungodliness' (Titus. 2:11). Such transforming grace draws us all to repentance and empowers all of us for the 'obedience of faith'. We give ourselves to God and walk by His Spirit in the path of costly grace in every sphere of our lives (Rom. 1:5; 8:12-17; 16:26).

In establishing Christian communities the apostles therefore did not teach doctrine without discipleship, faith without formation, or grace without godliness. Rather, they called believers to 'live lives worthy of the gospel', insisting 'in the Lord' that they abandon their 'former way of life' and embrace 'the new humanity', 'putting on Christ' and living His new life (Eph. 4:17-24; *cf.* Rom. 6:1-14; 1 Pet. 1:14-15; 2:11).

Moreover, the apostles consistently taught that the baptised were, by the Spirit, to pursue godliness and combat sin by putting to death the 'works of the flesh' (*e.g.* Gal. 5:16-21; 1 John 2:15-17). In founding and teaching communities of disciples who would offer this good news of God's grace to all, the apostles therefore repeatedly issued a serious call to holiness which embraced all areas of human life including sexual conduct (1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:8-10; Heb. 12:14-16; Jude 4; Rev. 2:14).

B. Apostolic Commitment to the Church's Integrity

In its ministry of *stewarding God's grace* so as to offer it to the world, the Church, being 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets' (Eph. 2:20) must in every age follow the apostles'

example. Its teaching and discipline must remain centred on Christ and within the boundaries of essential apostolic teaching.

The apostles' preaching established *communities of grace* who confessed 'Jesus is Lord'. These 'apostolic congregations' were marked by believers' devoted submission to apostolic teaching (Acts 2:42; Rom. 6:17; Eph. 4:20). Building on the one foundation of Jesus himself (1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20), who had 'loved the Church' as His bride and had 'given himself up for her to make her holy' (Eph. 5:25-26), the apostles could not compromise the holiness of the Church. Instead they saw that, as God had called Israel to be 'holy', 'set apart' as distinct 'amongst the nations', so now the Church was to be a 'holy temple' and a 'holy nation' (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-9; cf. Exod. 19:3-6; Lev. 18:3-5; 19:2; Deut. 4:5-8; Isa. 42:6-7). They thus sought to build a united body drawn from the nations ('one' and 'catholic') which was the 'pillar and foundation of the truth' (1 Tim. 3.15) and which, through obedience to apostolic teaching (Rom. 15:18; Phil. 2:12-13; 1 Pet. 1:22), conveyed and embodied that teaching in the wider world with clarity and consistency (Eph. 3:10; 4:4-17).

In order, then, for the Church to witness to the gospel with integrity and to embody the gospel's purpose, the apostles had to guard the Church's distinctive boundaries on matters of both doctrine and ethics, including sexual morality. This is evident in their use of appropriate loving discipline to ensure obedience to apostolic teaching (1 Cor. 4:14-5:5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Rev. 2:20), their appointment of local teachers to teach the truth (Tit. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:2), and their warnings against harmful false teachers (*e.g.* Acts 20:29-31; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 1 John 2:18-23).

This is why, as part of the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' church, the Church of England rightly orders its common life so that there are 'shepherds of Christ's flock and guardians of the faith of the apostles' who, in 'proclaiming the gospel of God's kingdom and leading His people in mission', vow to 'refute error' (Common Worship: Ordination & Consecration of a Bishop) and are called to 'banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions' (Canon C18).

C. Apostolic Teaching about Marriage and Singleness

The Bible as the *revelation of grace* clearly teaches that God made humanity in His image and likeness—embodied as male and female—and gave the gifts of marriage and singleness for our benefit. This apostolic teaching about marriage and singleness is part of God's gracious call and purposes for human flourishing and is good news for all.

On Jesus' authority (*e.g.* Matt. 19:4-6, based on Gen. 2:24), the Church of England bears witness to this teaching by affirming that 'marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side' (Canon B30). Moreover, like the sacraments, marriage is a gift of God and a *sign of grace* in which His faithful and sacrificial covenant-love for us is made visible in and through our created human bodies (Eph. 5:31-2). As 'a gift of God in creation', marriage enables human flourishing and serves the common good by being 'the foundation of family life in which children are [born and] nurtured and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad, may find strength, companionship and comfort, and grow to maturity in love' (Preface to Marriage Service).

Jesus' own understanding of the importance of marriage is underlined by His radical teaching on adultery and divorce (Matt. 5:27-32), which went to the heart of the Old Testament prohibitions in these areas. His reputation as a 'friend of sinners' was never won at the cost of watering down such ethical teachings or advocating 'cheap grace'. He rather held together grace and truth (John 1:14) in His teaching and pastoral practice — a model which the Church should always aim to follow.

Jesus, in His own experience and express teaching (Matt. 19:12), also affirmed singleness, equally, as a gracious gift from God—as did Paul (1 Cor. 7:7, 32-35); it is an opportunity for faithful and sacrificial dedication to ‘the Lord’s affairs’ and for demonstrating an embodied longing for the ultimate marital union of Christ to His Church (Rev. 19:6-9).

In keeping with this understanding, rooted in the teaching of the Old Testament (*e.g.* Exod. 20:14; Prov. 5:15-23) and reaffirmed by Jesus himself, the apostles taught that any sex outside marriage has the character of sin (*e.g.* Matt. 5:27-29; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 13:4). Thus, as the House of Bishops recently reaffirmed, sexual relations are ‘properly conducted only within heterosexual marriage’ (GS 2055, para 54). Sex is not a personal ‘right’ to be grasped or demanded. It is a gracious gift ordained by our Creator—tied to His gift of marriage—which is to be ‘received with thanksgiving’ (1 Tim. 4:4), but only within the limits He has laid down.

Application: Apostolic Faith and Life Today

In the light of this wider theological vision and apostolic teaching on the gospel’s purpose, the church’s integrity, and marriage and singleness, we therefore commit ourselves to the following five conclusions and commend them to the Church of England as it considers these complex issues of human sexuality and marriage:

1. We, in the church of Jesus Christ, are called to welcome, and offer God’s saving grace to, everyone—whatever their sexual history, identity or behaviour—thus manifesting the radical inclusivity of the gospel by which ‘God our Saviour wants *all* people to be saved’ (1 Tim. 2:3).

- Knowing that God’s created intent for human sexuality has been spoilt by sin in all people and all societies, we acknowledge our own need, following conversion, to keep turning to God for forgiveness and transformation.
- We confess that to be the *community of grace* the Church itself needs forgiveness and transformation. We long for all to hear and receive the gospel message of grace and truth, rather than to fear that we, as Christians, will cast the first stone. So we receive Jesus’ words as also applying to us and to all: ‘Neither do I condemn you ... Go now and leave your life of sin’ (John 8:11). We want the church to be a community of love, warmth, hospitality, vulnerability, covenant friendship, appropriate touch, mutual support, and to be a family unit which is far bigger than some small, inward-looking heterosexual pairing.
- We therefore repent of our many failures in this area, seeking God’s grace afresh to welcome, listen to, and provide pastoral support and care for all.
- Together, we will seek to honour the gift of our embodied sexual differentiation; to express life-long faithful love in marriage; and to nurture love and intimacy while abstaining from sex in all our relationships other than marriage.

2. We recognise that some fellow Christians no longer accept the Church’s teaching on marriage, singleness and sex but, because it is an integral part of our calling to be holy, we cannot treat this teaching as an ‘optional extra’ (or *adiaphora*).

- We believe this teaching is both apostolic and essential to the gospel’s transforming purpose and thus must be compassionately and clearly proclaimed and explained in and by the Church.

- This area is therefore of a higher order than other divisive matters, often viewed as ‘secondary’ (for example, the ordination of women), because it calls for faithful obedience to the unambiguous and authoritative teaching of Scripture concerning godly living and human flourishing.
 - Thus, the upholding of this teaching, rooted in our credal confession of God as Creator, and the enabling of Christians to live it with joy and confidence, is an essential aspect of biblical faithfulness—especially when, as in our day, these matters are being so hotly contested.
- 3. We believe that the Church of England, being defined by adherence to essential apostolic truth, should not accept teaching or affirm behaviour—whether implicitly or explicitly—which contradicts or undermines the boundaries laid down by apostolic teaching and practice.**
- Although other actions may also amount to such affirmation, we hold, on the basis of our Anglican understanding of our prayers expressing what we believe (*‘lex orandi, lex credendi’*) and of a Church that is ordered by its liturgy, formularies and legal provisions, that any changes in our liturgy or canons which seek to express, authorise or commend a divergence from these distinctive boundaries would be seen as a departure from the apostolic faith.
- 4. We further believe that, as we have sadly witnessed in recent years among Anglicans, the affirmation of non-apostolic teaching and behaviour necessarily ‘tears the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level’ (Primates’ Communiqué, Oct. 2003) and creates ‘significant distance’ (Primates’ Communiqué, Jan. 2016) between those who are following the apostles’ teaching and those departing from it. Such affirmation by the Church of England would have a similar distancing effect on our ecumenical relationships with the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and most Protestant and Pentecostal churches, which have not changed their doctrine in this vital area.**
- These consequences inevitably arise because—for those who wish to follow the apostles’ practice—such significant departure from apostolic teaching regrettably requires in response some degree of visible differentiation, in order formally to acknowledge and mark this distance. Moving away from ‘apostolic’ and ‘catholic’ teaching concerning what it means to be ‘holy’ will tragically mean we are less visibly ‘one’.
 - The potential forms and extent of such differentiation are varied and they must never lose sight of the goal of restored unity in apostolic truth. Nevertheless, such acts of differentiation become a necessary component of biblical faithfulness if they are the only means to ensure the continued preservation of a cohesive ‘apostolic’ community, clearly defined and publicly distinguished by apostolic truth and thus able to offer a faithful and coherent witness to a confused and needy world.
- 5. We do not wish for this differentiation, but recognise that it may become a tragic necessity. Our submission to apostolic teaching and practice means that, as apostolic Anglicans, we are deeply committed to being members of Church of England provinces which are similarly submissive and so communicating and clearly upholding—both *de facto* and *de jure*—the pattern of teaching and discipline handed down to us by the apostles.**

- We therefore pray that the Church of England does not turn away from its teaching on marriage, singleness and sex—entrusted to it by Christ and His apostles—or abandon its goal of empowering Christians to live lives worthy of the gospel of grace.
- We believe this teaching remains good news for society today, where many struggle to form wholesome and life-giving intimate friendships, lack good models of loving, faithful marriage and parenting, and face confusing choices of identity and gender.
- And so we commit ourselves to working within our local congregations and networks in order that they too may walk compassionately in obedience to the apostles' teaching. We also commit to praying for the people of England that these biblical truths will increasingly come to be recognized for their long-established and proven benefit.

Conclusion

In offering this reflection we place ourselves afresh under the grace of God and the authority of Scripture, and we consecrate ourselves to Jesus as Lord, rededicating ourselves to obey the teaching of His apostles. And we do so in a spirit of repentance for the ways we daily fail to practise the grace and truth that Jesus both preached and lived.

Our hope and prayer is that it will provide clarity in a time of confusion, encourage and bring together those who share its vision, and enable those with a different vision to understand the nature and depth of our concerns and disagreement. Going forward, we need to consider together the implications of our differences for our life together. We do this with the positive hope that in due course we might come again as Anglicans to 'experience that unity in truth and love we have in Christ especially through confession of the apostolic faith'.

'Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever' (Eph. 3:20-21).

*Almighty God, who built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone:
so join us together in unity of spirit by their doctrine,
that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.*