



Where next on same-sex marriage?

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Lee Gatiss takes a look at the same-sex marriage debate in the Church of England, and considers some of the ways forward.

So, we have completed more than two years of 'facilitated' or 'shared conversations' about sexuality issues in the Church of England. This was encouraged by the Pilling Report a few years ago, as the way forward on this issue. But what happens now that the conversations have ended? And what, if anything, should be done?

There are various potential options for the future of the Church on this subject. Let's explore what those might be.

Option 1 – Full acceptance of gay marriage in church

This is the desired outcome for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transexual (LGBT) groups such as Changing Attitude and Accepting Evangelicals. The latter describes itself, for example, in this way: 'We are an open network of Evangelical Christians who believe the time has come to move towards the acceptance of faithful, loving same-sex partnerships at every level of church life, and the development of a positive Christian ethic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.'

So this would mean the Church of England asking the Government to remove the so-called 'quadruple lock' in the Same-Sex Marriage legislation, which currently makes it illegal for Anglican churches to celebrate same-sex marriages. That reflected the Government's commitment that no religious organisation or

representative would be forced to conduct or participate in same sex-marriage ceremonies. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and Parliament sought to protect and promote religious freedom by making sure the Church of England – and individual ministers – would not be compelled to marry gay couples.

This 'lock' ensures that religious organisations and their representatives (not just the Church of England) can continue to act in accordance with traditional doctrines and beliefs on this issue. And since the Church of England's official doctrine of marriage in Canon B30 (and numerous other statements, including the 1987 Highton Motion of General Synod and the 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10) remains the biblical doctrine, this legislation would need to be unravelled in order for change to occur. There would also need to be full-scale doctrinal and canonical revision, and perhaps all kinds of 'freedom of conscience' discussions in the Church for years to come.

Option 2 – Pastoral accommodation

Since option one seems politically very difficult at present, a compromise option has been widely discussed. This envisages no change on marriage in church, so (it is said) doctrine is officially unchanged. But there is an allowance for 'pastoral accommodation', i.e. prayers and/or blessings for gay couples who have been married elsewhere will be permitted in churches where certain conditions are met (such as PCC



and/or episcopal approval).

This has been presented as a stepping-stone measure by the gay rights movement, and spoken of as a model of 'good disagreement' (where everyone gets something they are lobbying for and nobody gets everything). The use of these seemingly positive and clever euphemisms ('pastoral accommodation' / 'good disagreement') should not be allowed to hide one simple fact: what is being proposed here is a full-scale change in the Church's doctrine of sin, by stealth. It permits blessings for things which God does not bless. It celebrates and calls holy, that which God calls unholy – indeed, that which he says excludes people from his kingdom.

Given that existing guidelines allow even clergy to engage in same-sex civil partnerships, this option might seem like only an evolution, a tolerant measure which keeps official doctrine intact. It is not, however, the most loving or kind thing to permit people to wander further and further away from the one true God. Sin is a part of all our lives, even once we have

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become Christians. Yet it is not something to be tolerated, blessed, and celebrated – but something of which we all must repent.

Options 1 and 2 would inevitably lead to some kind of split in the Church of England if they were pursued. Special arrangements might be offered to those who object to the new development (for a while at least). They could be either informal, on a diocese-by-diocese basis, or some kind of official structure

such as a new jurisdictional Province of the Church created to handle 'traditionalists' (who will quickly become labelled in other ways). And new structures will be created or further developed outside the Church of England to cope with those who leave as a result of this acceptance of heretical false teaching.

Option 3 – The status quo

This option is the default position. No change in the doctrine of marriage or the doctrine of sin. But lobbyists and activists will continue to push the boundaries and test the limits of existing rules and subvert them where possible. None but the most naive can think that this option is acceptable or stable as a solution.

Option 4 – No change in doctrine. Enforcement of proper discipline.

This option would keep the doctrine of marriage intact, but it would enforce proper discipline within the Church. Currently there is a *de facto* acceptance of one rule for clergy and another for laity (in line with a certain interpretation of the Bishops' document *Issues in Human Sexuality*). Many would like to see this corrected, and for the Church to be consistent in the standards of behaviour it calls upon all its members to uphold.

Those clergy who have contravened the official position regarding same-sex marriage, and have entered into such marriages themselves have – technically – all been disciplined so far. However, that discipline has not been especially and consistently tough. Some have not had their licences renewed. Others have, however, remained in post (and even on General Synod), with official censure of some kind on their records perhaps, but still with a pulpit, a platform, and a dog collar. Option 4 would make it easier to remove such people from their posts and bar others in same-sex marriages (and even perhaps civil partnerships) from ministry in the Church of England.

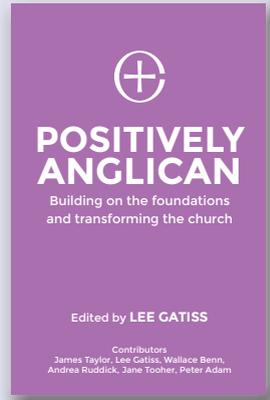


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To be consistent, others would take this further and seek to discipline those who teach against canon law and the biblical doctrine of marriage, whether they themselves contravene it in their own lifestyles or not. After all, false teaching is pernicious and infectious (it spreads like gangrene, the New Testament says) and so it would not be a loving or spiritually healthy option to permit it to make further inroads into the church. According to the Bible and the teaching of the church throughout every age, Christians must be driven by what is most pleasing to God, rather than by our own sinful appetites and disordered desires. Besides, it would be inconsistent only to discipline those who live a certain way and not also to censure those who encourage this.

Currently, official guidelines make it plain that access to the sacraments cannot be denied to those who are living in civil partnerships, even if they are sexually active, or to their children. So although 'clergy of the Church of England should not provide services of blessing for those who register a civil partnership... lay people who have registered civil partnerships ought not to be asked to give assurances about the nature of their relationship before being admitted to baptism, confirmation and communion.' The official guidance says the same about same-sex marriages: that while 'the same standards of conduct applied to all, the Church of England should not exclude from its fellowship those lay people of gay or lesbian orientation who, in conscience, were unable to accept that a life of sexual abstinence was required of them.'

As far as many are concerned, this is far too spiritually dangerous a situation to be continued. The Bible, and the Thirty-nine Articles, make it clear that those who partake of the sacraments while in such a state 'purchase to themselves damnation' (Article 25, alluding to 1 Corinthians 11). No minister of the Church of England should willingly allow their parishioners to make such a purchase!

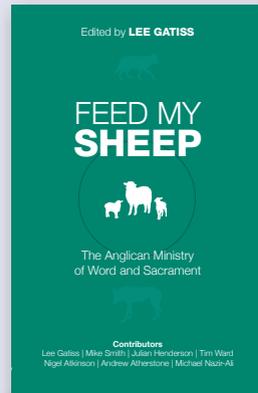


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Rather, as the Ordinal says, 'They are to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; they are to teach and to admonish, to feed and provide for his family, to search for his children in the wilderness of this world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ for ever.' Rather than dispensing cheap grace, or playing diversity politics with the sacraments, faithful stewards 'are to call their hearers to repentance'.

Option 6 argues that it is not simply sufficient to remove false teaching and false teachers from the church, but we must also demonstrate a loving commitment to their ultimate salvation, by calling them back to the one true God.

Option 4 may require amendments to the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure and/or the Clergy Discipline Measure. But without change of this nature, there will remain a lack of clarity and credibility in the Church of England's position on the subject. That would also demonstrate a lack of love towards those who desperately need the church to act in a way that is lovingly faithful to Scripture.

Option 5 – No doctrinal change. Enforcement of proper discipline, including internationally.

This option takes things further and also calls for the enforcement of proper discipline within

the Anglican Communion as a whole. That is, it will properly discipline those Provinces (such as The Episcopal Church, in the USA) which have introduced gay marriage into the church. By 'proper discipline' here we mean more than a few stern words. Removal from the Communion should be on the cards, despite the large amounts of money often splashed around by some American churches. Truth and godliness cannot be bought. Although one can (as just mentioned, above) 'purchase damnation' through unrepentant participation in the sacraments, it is impossible to purchase a right standing with God. It should also be impossible to buy a way into the Anglican Communion regardless of doctrine and practice.

Option 6 – No doctrinal change. Enforcement of proper discipline. Public call to repentance.

This final option would include all of options 4–5. It also includes a public call for the revisionists worldwide to repent. The argument here is that it is not sufficient simply to remove false teaching and false teachers from the church, but we must also demonstrate a loving commitment to their ultimate salvation, by calling them back to the one true God, whose ways alone can lead to human flourishing – in this world and the next. As the Book of Common Prayer rightly says, 'Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live... Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do at this present, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy.'

Change will come

There are a number of committed LGBT advocates on General Synod, but not as many as is often thought. 'Affirming Catholicism'



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and 'Accepting Evangelicals' do not constitute a majority on Synod. There are many clearly opposed to their agenda, and a large number of potentially persuadable people in the middle, looking for godly leadership and a positive way forward. There is no reason at all to think that the adoption of options 1 or 2 are a foregone conclusion.

Many gay activists have a quasi-religious commitment to a view of historical development which sees the ultimate victory of their social agenda as utterly assured. That is why their opponents are always portrayed as 'on the wrong side of history'. This is a form of historical determinism so beloved of Stalinist Marxists in the last century. But it is deeply and fundamentally flawed.

The problem is that many conservative Christians have also bought into the same theory. Too often they believe the propaganda that they are destined to lose political and cultural battles of this sort. We may know that ultimately Jesus will win and truth will prevail – one day. But we are rendered powerless and mute in the here and now, by the sheer avalanche of negative messaging from the world and the worldly church. And so we too readily buy into the idea that theological liberalism is more powerful and attractive and effective.

But it is not so. The devil is a liar, and the father of lies. He has been doing it for a long time, and is an expert in deception. Yet the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. If God's word was enough to create

the world, and if by it he sustains all things, surely we must be more confident in the message he has given us for the people of this confused and confusing world? It has divine power to demolish strongholds and every lofty opinion raised against it. So let us take every thought captive to obey Christ, and entrust the outcomes to him. With God, anything is possible.

God's word has divine power to demolish strongholds and every lofty opinion raised against it.

As JC Ryle said, 'It may be that our numbers may be thinned, and many may desert our cause under the pressure of incessant official frowns, persecution, ridicule, and unpopularity. But we have no cause for discouragement, despondency, or despair. Then let us stand firm and fight on.'



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