# Churchman

EDITORIAL

## To Believe or not to Believe

Paraphrasing the mental agony of Hamlet seems to be a curiously appropriate response to some of the goings-on that we have recently witnessed in the Anglican Communion, and particularly in the Church of England. The much-awaited *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on human sexuality*, popularly named after its chairman Sir Joseph Pilling, appeared in late November 2013 to a chorus of disapproval—but for completely different reasons. Those on the 'left' found it far too timid in its proposals for opening the church to the gay agenda, whereas the conservatives, both in England and elsewhere, were appalled that the *Report* made any concession to homosexual couples and rejected it as a capitulation to apostasy and unbelief.

In fairness, it is hard to see what else Sir Joseph and his colleagues could have done, given the circumstances. Most of them were sympathetic (in varying degrees) to the pro-gay agenda, and the working party would not have been set up at all if a change of official policy in that direction had not been envisaged. Those behind the whole idea knew that they would face stiff opposition from Evangelicals and that they could not pretend otherwise. To deal with this, their strategy was to appoint a bishop who would be credible to the Evangelical wing of the church but also malleable. The hope was that if such a man could be persuaded to sign the report, the fangs of the Evangelical opposition would be blunted and the case for the changes they wanted would be strengthened, if not completely won.

Here they miscalculated. Keith Sinclair, the bishop of Birkenhead, was chosen as the sacrificial lamb but to the consternation of the organisers, he refused to play the part. Instead, he dug his heels in and wrote a dissenting report which has turned out to be far superior to anything else in the document and has rallied a broad section of church opinion behind him. That was not supposed to happen, and now the church authorities are stuck. If they go with the majority of the working group they will please nobody, least of all those who are pressing for 'real' change; if they follow the bishop of Birkenhead people will start to ask why only one orthodox Christian was appointed to the working party when his views are those of the broad mass of church people. Laughably, the majority on

the working group tried to undercut Bishop Sinclair by commissioning a rival report from David Runcorn, a self-professed 'Evangelical' of sorts who represents virtually nobody but whose views on the subject at hand are more congenial to those who set the agenda. His submission was not discussed by the working group but is attached to the report as an appendix, whose only purpose is to undercut the bishop of Birkenhead by pretending that his is not the only Evangelical view available. Who do they think they are fooling by this kind of tactic?

As if that were not enough, while all this has been going on word has leaked out that one of the contenders for the vacant see of Exeter was the dean of St Albans, whose appointment to Reading back in 2003 caused such a stir. Have people forgotten that Anglican Mainstream was founded largely in reaction to that, and that since then it has consistently campaigned against the promotion of openly homosexual clergy to the church's hierarchy? Everyone knows that if a clergyman in a civil partnership were to be appointed to a bishopric the church would explode, but the authorities press on as if this does not matter. Quite apart from the rights and wrongs of this, pity the poor dean himself—after what he went through a decade or more ago, would he really want to be subjected to the same treatment all over again? How could such a thing be allowed to happen?

But that is not all. As if to show that the church is not obsessed with homosexuality, now we have a report from yet another working group, this one chaired by the bishop of Wakefield, which suggests that we should revise our baptismal liturgy in a way that will take out any serious reference to sin, the devil and the nature of the Christian's spiritual warfare. The purpose, of course, is to make the rite comprehensible to those who do not go to church, and who should not be presenting their children for baptism in the first place. It might seem uncharitable to point out that the bishop of Wakefield is about to lose his see as the Church of England downsizes for the first time in its history, but that may be a parable of what is going on more widely. The tide of faith seems to be ebbing, not only on Dover beach but in the General Synod, and the remaining vestiges of Christianity are being carried out to sea with it. This time, however, opposition to the changes has been vocal and widespread, so there is a reasonable chance that the proposed reforms will be quietly shelved. Even so, it is only a matter of time before something similar comes back again, and no one with any experience of these things will sit back and rejoice that there is no more to worry about.

The truth is that there is a colossal battle going on for the soul of the Church, both in England and in the wider Anglican Communion. As the Pilling report was honest enough to point out, this battle is not really about what policy the Church should adopt in particular circumstances, but what principles its decision-making should be based on. This was the

point being made by the bishop of Birkenhead in his dissenting submission, and is the main reason why it is so brilliant. Bishop Sinclair did not get lost in the details but pointed to the weaknesses in the underlying assumptions on which they were based, thereby exposing the fallacious character of the arguments being used to advance the liberal programme. With audacity like that, it is a safe bet that he will not be appointed to any other working group in the foreseeable future! He has shown that the ecclesiastical emperor has no clothes, a form of *lèse-majesté* that will not be easily forgiven in the corridors of power. If the Evangelical wing of the church can overcome its visceral suspicion of bishops and unite with Birkenhead and those who think like him in a common cause, there may be interesting times ahead and the proverbial Chinese curse may take on new life in the normally placid Church of England.

The fundamental issue at stake can be stated quite simply—has God revealed himself to us in the Bible or not? Are we supposed to conform our way of thinking to what the Scriptures teach, or are we free to relegate them to a historic shelf in the library and move on into a brave new world where non-churchgoers set the agenda? Is keeping articulate unbelievers quiet what we are meant to be doing? Or are we called to proclaim the Word of God without fear or favour to a generation which has forgotten it or perhaps never been exposed to its message? The Pilling report stated quite clearly that Biblical references to homosexual practice are uniformly negative, but the majority of the working group thought that they were free to move on from there to something more in keeping with the modern gay campaign for what its advocates see as 'equal rights.' If God disagrees, too bad.

This is an intolerable situation, and not just for Evangelicals. On the women's ordination issue, proponents at least tried to make a Biblical case for their position, and when they failed, they fell back on the more plausible argument that the New Testament is unclear on the subject. With the homosexual question though, it is quite different. Here there is general agreement about the facts—the argument is whether they matter or not. On this, no Christian can be in any doubt. Our faith is grounded in the Word of God revealed once for all, and if something is proposed that goes against that Word, it must be rejected. There can be no compromise with the world, the flesh and the devil, even if the baptismal working group has concluded that they can be disregarded in the interests of reaching out to wider society.

It is easy to quarrel with particular proposals and decisions, but underlying them is something much deeper and more intractable. This is that the Church of England is in serious danger of falling victim to those in high places within it who do not accept what God has said to his people. They may be sincere in their unbelief, but unbelief is what it is and this needs to be pointed out. We should not hold anything against

the liberals in the Church on a personal basis. They are just as entitled to their opinions as anyone else, and we should not object when they express them—as long as they do not pretend to be Christians or occupy posts from which their convictions ought to disqualify them. This is a hard thing to say, but if we are ever to evangelise the nation and win at least some credibility and respect for our views, it is vital that the Church should speak with a single voice. If the Church is to be true to itself, that voice can only be the voice of God revealed to us in the Scriptures.

The problem in the Church is not that the orthodox faith is not widely held—it is. The snag is that those who hold it are effectively marginalised and even excluded from the central organs of administration. Who appoints the committees that come to such outrageous decisions as the ones we have seen in recent months? How is it that their membership is skewed in the direction of error and those who uphold the truth so often find themselves on the defensive? There are occasional exceptions, it is true. The faith and order commission's recent report on marriage is one such, but when it was published the *Church Times* simply said that it should be ignored—and that looks like what is going to happen. Orthodoxy raised its ugly head and so the best thing is to pretend that it is not there and move on.

In one sense, of course, working groups and commissions of this kind should not be necessary. What the faith and order report concluded about marriage is what everyone in the Church ought to believe already, and if that were true, no more need be said. The same is true of the bishop of Birkenhead's dissenting submission to the Pilling report. Since all Christians ought to agree with him on this point, he should have been able to publish his statement and secure the signatures of everyone on the working group without further ado. One might well ask why his submission was not the report itself, in which case the rest would have been redundant.

Unfortunately, as we know only too well, these bureaucratic exercises take place because there is a powerful lobby that wants to persuade the Church to abandon its faith. The Pilling report was remarkably candid about this. Recognising that there would be people who could not accept even its fairly mild revisionist agenda, it proposed a period of 'facilitated conversations,' the only purpose of which was to persuade enough conservative doubters to change their minds and isolate the hard core opposition which they have no hope of taming otherwise. Those who have objected to the report have understood this and pointed it out, but whether their protests will be enough to bury the whole idea remains to be seen.

What is encouraging in the present situation is that there are signs that the silent majority in the Church is finally starting to wake up. The immediate (and quite sharply negative) reactions to the proposed changes

to the baptismal liturgy are an encouraging sign in this respect. Here is something that will affect every parish in the land if it is allowed to proceed, and that over time will dilute the message of the Gospel even among those who are determined to preach it in all its glorious fulness. Everybody knows that baptism is a problem for the Church, which still finds itself christening far too many people whose parents and sponsors have no idea what they are doing and will never darken the church door again. But instead of tackling this issue, the authorities seem to prefer to make the non-committed feel that there is nothing of any substance that they have to commit themselves to. Good intentions are enough and everybody can get back to the real business of life, in which the presence and power of God are not felt.

The crisis of belief which this reflects does not begin with those unbelievers who continue to practise the remnants of a disappearing folk religion, but with the church authorities who pander to them. Is this what they think of as 'evangelism'? If it is, then the General Synod's resolutions in favour of spreading the Gospel will fall flat before they get started. It is not just that the trumpet will be making an uncertain sound—it will not be making any sound at all.

Surely it is time for the Evangelicals in the Church to take the lead and encourage believers of all churchmanships to stand up and be counted. That is what has been happening with GAFCON. It is not a specifically Evangelical organisation, but Evangelicals are playing a leading role in it and others are joining in. Can the same thing not happen within the Church of England? We have the numbers and the enthusiasm, but where is the leadership? Where is the willingness to work together with those who differ from us on secondary matters, but stand with us on the essentials? The stakes are too high for misplaced priorities to be allowed to disrupt the strategy that is needed for turning the Church around. Unless and until the decision-making instruments can be set free from their current liberal captivity, the battles will continue and the likelihood is that an ungodly agenda will be pushed through over the heads of those who are weary of objecting and in disarray over tactics. As Keith Getty and Stuart Townend put it:

> Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds, help us grasp the heights of your plan for us
> Truth unchanged from the dawn of time, that will echo down through eternity.
> And by grace we'll stand on your promises, and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us;
> Speak, O Lord, till your church is built and the earth is filled with your glory.

To believe or not to believe—that is the question. Let us hope that the answer will be clearly sounded in the months ahead by all those who bear the name of Christ in sincerity and truth.

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