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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Changing Attitudes

One of the constant themes of what may loosely be called the ‘gay agenda’ is that it is built on a lie. The deception begins with the name itself—far from being ‘gay,’ most of those who promote it are anything but. They come across most of the time as steely, determined and bitter. Get in their way and you are immediately a target for abuse, which may range from being called ‘homophobic’ to being sued in court for breach of some equality law or other. When Domenico Dolce, a self-confessed homosexual and co-creator of the fashion designs marketed as Dolce and Gabbana, dared to say that the traditional family (father and mother with their natural children) was better than any other, the outrage from the ‘gay’ community was palpable. No less a figure than Sir Elton John called for a boycott of their products, only to be seen a day or two later carrying one of their bags into his home. His outburst was followed by echoes from a motley crew of minor celebrities who swore that they would burn every Dolce and Gabbana product they owned, perhaps failing to notice that even the smallest purchase from that fashion house could feed an African family for months.

The unreality of it all was such that even more sober commentators failed to notice that what Dolce said was only common sense. So warped has discussion of homosexuality become that speaking even such an obvious truth is now risky. Who knows when the boycott will turn into a prosecution and land the unfortunate victims in prison? Something that only a few years ago would have seemed utterly fantastic has now become a real possibility, and wise people keep their mouths shut, especially if they are looking for a job in public services, the media or teaching. This increasingly widespread sense of fear is interpreted as a growing acceptance of homosexual practices and lifestyle, by the younger generation in particular, but nobody knows whether this is true or not. Prudence can be an amazingly effective shaper of public opinion, as anyone who has lived in a dictatorship can testify. Supporters of the gay agenda claim that they are victims of ingrained prejudice and that they

must fight to get their voices heard, when in fact it is now very much the other way round. Once again, the big Lie is doing its wonderful work of persuasion.

Even in Ireland, the impact of this can be seen all too clearly. Until recently, nobody would have thought that the emerald isle would be receptive to such things, but the recent referendum there, in which over sixty percent of the voters approved gay marriage—the first time that any electorate has done so—and the contemporaneous (though unrelated) fining of a bakery in Northern Ireland, whose owners refused to bake a wedding cake with the slogan ‘support gay marriage’ on it have shown us what the true extent of this phenomenon is. Same-sex marriage is still illegal in Northern Ireland, so it is hard to see why the bakery was at fault, but that no longer matters. The Equality Commission there has so decreed and that seems to be enough, though its ruling will be appealed.

This wider context has to be borne in mind as we approach the so-called ‘facilitated conversations’ that are taking place in the Church of England. Following the publication in November 2013 of the *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*, chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling and generally known as ‘The Pilling Report,’ a number of discussion papers have been drawn up that are designed to promote this further dialogue, which was its principal recommendation. Many people, including most prominent Evangelicals, have reacted negatively to this, because they realise what the strategy is. ‘Facilitated conversations’ are a way of softening the opposition to change. If anyone doubts that purpose, a quick read of the supporting literature will suffice to make their agenda clear.

Of course, as the authors of the discussion documents point out more than once, the outcome of the conversations is not predetermined in advance. It is expected that many people will come out of them without having changed their minds, and the doomsday scenario of a divided church that cannot witness to the nation is held up as a real possibility once they are over. Realistically, those who have set the agenda recognise that it will be impossible to please everyone and they expect that some people will leave the Church of England as a result. Who those people will be is not stated, but if the analogy with the Church of Scotland (which is given a prominent place in the documentation) holds up, the answer is obvious. As the would-be facilitators point out, in that church there have already been a number of prominent secessions. What they do not say is that all of them have involved the departure of conservative Evangelicals. Say no more.

In preparing the ground for the conversations, the documentation entitled *Grace and Disagreement* takes the Pilling Report as a kind of base line. Perhaps this is fair enough, but the way it is presented shows just how far the Lie has penetrated the thinking that has gone into this. The bulk of the Report is glossed over, but two of its appendices are singled out for special mention. One of them is by the bishop of Birkenhead, a member of the commission who dissented from the main Report and submitted his own conclusions, as he had every right to do. The other is a paper by David Runcorn, who was not a member of the commission, who did not make any presentation to it and whose essay was specially commissioned by Sir Joseph Pilling in order to give the impression that not all Evangelicals think like the bishop of Birkenhead. It should never have been appended to the Report, but there it is, and it is now being treated as if it has equal standing and significance. We are told that there have been positive and negative reactions to both papers, which must be true, but there is no analysis of them. For all we know, there may have been 3000 positive responses to the bishop of Birkenhead and three negative ones, alongside three positive responses to Mr Runcorn and 3000 negative ones. Who can tell? All that can be said for certain is that the bishop of Birkenhead's quite legitimate submission has been subtly downgraded and relativised—the Lie at work again.

It does not stop there. The bishop of Birkenhead is actually quoted at one point, but only to the extent that he is in agreement with the main recommendations of the Pilling Report. The impression is thus given that there is really no problem at all. Another person who suffers this kind of treatment in *Grace and Disagreement* is Professor Oliver O'Donovan. Professor O'Donovan does not support changing the church's official teaching or practice, and to be fair, the discussion documents do record his cautious observation that it may take 'many generations' before we know enough about the questions at issue to be able to say anything sensible at all. But somehow his reticence does not meet the criterion of urgency which the Pilling Report has insisted on—in its view, the reflection of 'many generations' has to be collapsed into a more reasonable time frame, in this case about two years. The result of this is that Professor O'Donovan is presented as someone who is open to possible change and so he can be enlisted on that side of the debate without further ado. Worse still, Canon Dr Phil Groves, who directs 'Continuing Indaba' in the Anglican Communion, manages to quote from a sermon that Professor O'Donovan preached on the subject in 2007, but in such a way as to give

the impression that the preacher is all for the gay agenda, which is the exact opposite of what he actually said. The Lie does it again...

In his contribution to the discussion, Dr Groves demonstrates what a master of deception he is. At no point does he suggest that 'Continuing Indaba' has been a complete failure, though anyone who follows Anglican affairs knows that it has. There is not a word here about the Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON), whose members represent more than half the practising Anglicans in the world and which has flatly refused to have anything to do with it. Nor, of course, is there any mention of the recent decision by those African provinces that are not associated with GAFCON not to have anything to do with it either. Instead, we are led to believe that 'good disagreement' is not only achievable but is the way of the future!

The worst, however, is yet to come. People on both sides of this argument recognise that the Bible is clear on the subject. There is not a great deal about homosexuality in the Scriptures, but what there is negative and the New Testament, in particular, is severe in its condemnation of what it regards as a pagan practice. With few exceptions, it is now generally acknowledged on all sides that attempts to appeal to David and Jonathan as a positive example of a same-sex relationship will not work—neither the text nor the context is favourable to such an interpretation. This presents the revisionists with quite a challenge and there have been two responses to it. One, backed by Colin Coward and Changing Attitude, ignores the Bible altogether and makes its appeal to experience. Rather than read ancient texts, these people argue, it would be better to listen to the tales of woe that various members of Changing Attitude are only too willing to 'share' with whoever will listen. The technique is to play on the emotions and get people to shift their position on compassionate grounds, regardless of what the official teaching of the church might be.

The second approach, which is the one favoured by the discussion documents, wants to reinterpret the Bible in the light of modern 'knowledge.' This line of argument is developed by Dr Loveday Alexander, who claims that because people like the Apostle Paul had no concept of sexual 'orientation' what they had to say on the subject is no longer relevant. She is also greatly impressed by the 'research' done by Linda Woodhead, which claims that the Church is losing the younger generation and cutting itself off from the nation that it is called to serve. This line of attack is very clever because it gives the impression that it is both scientific and compassionate—scientific because it takes into account the latest findings of modern research and compassionate because it seeks

to include people who would otherwise find themselves cut off from the body of Christ. The fact that it is a lie from beginning to end is hard to detect because it is covered in such apparent erudition, and it is by no means improbable that this sort of cleverness will persuade people who might resist the emotional appeal of Mr Coward and his friends.

Why is it a lie? First of all, it assumes that the Bible is a collection of the thoughts of great religious leaders of the past. The Apostle Paul is presented as someone who was limited by his circumstances and therefore unable to grasp the questions that we are asking today. There is no suggestion that he was inspired by God to write as he did, and yet that is the belief of Christians through the ages. The Bible is not just a historical record of what ancient people thought and did. It is the Word of God, given in time but transcending it. Dr Alexander is right to point out that it is odd to find a Church that ignores Jesus' clear commandments about divorce coming down hard against homosexuality, but her implied conclusion, which is that if Scripture can be ignored in one place it can be ignored in others, is false. Two wrongs do not make a right. What the Church ought to do is tighten up its teaching on divorce, not relax its approach to homosexuality, but that conclusion is not drawn.

Just as serious, Dr Alexander has fallen for the pseudo-scientific notion of 'orientation' which has replaced the Biblical doctrine of sin, a word which is never mentioned in any of the discussion documents. The truth is that all human beings are 'oriented' (if that is the word for it) towards disobedience to God. This will come out in different ways, but they all point in the same direction. Paul was well aware of it—he called 'orientation' the 'lusts of the flesh' and condemned them in whatever form they appeared. The Christian Gospel is not a message of surrender to desire but one of triumph over it, a triumph made possible by the death of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the lives of sinful men and women. If the Church has lost the younger generation, as Linda Woodhead claims, it is not because it has not pandered to their demands, but because it has ceased to preach this fundamental truth.

At the heart of the Lie is the assertion that the unbridgeable chasm between those who advocate same-sex marriage and those who are opposed to it can be overcome by a supposedly common dedication to 'mission.' Not only is mission the most important activity that the Church can be engaged in, an assertion that would gain widespread support, but it can be divorced from truth. The need is to 'reach' people, but not by challenging them with their need to repent and believe the Gospel. Instead we are supposed to speak their language, which in effect means accepting

the basic principles on which they operate. In other words, the Christian church has to surrender to the world in order to reach it, which is the exact opposite of what the New Testament teaches us. The Lie wins again.

Evangelicals are in a difficult position here. Along with all orthodox Christians, they have no choice but to stand and proclaim the faith once delivered to the saints as the only way forward in an unbelieving world. They cannot accept the basic premise of the ‘facilitated conversations’ which is that both sides in the discussion are equally faithful believers who are sincerely seeking to follow Jesus. That is yet another instance of the Lie at work. To follow Jesus is to take up the cross, and the cross puts earthly passions to death. To follow Jesus is to recognise him as the bridegroom who has come in search of his bride—matrimony is not a social construct that can be reshaped according to taste, but a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God. Widespread human failure in this area of life is not an excuse for abandoning the New Testament vision, but should propel us instead to recognise that we are all sinners in need of divine grace. This way of thinking is alien to the ‘facilitated conversations’ and for Evangelicals to participate in them within the guidelines laid down would be dishonest—a surrender to the Lie, in fact.

On the other hand, there is the argument that, as the French say, *les absents ont toujours tort*. If Evangelicals boycott the conversations, they will leave the field open to the revisionists who will then claim that they have the mind of the Church behind them. The membership of the groups being put together is already skewed in their direction, since it is stated that each one must have a few gay representatives and a number of people under 40, who are presumed to be more favourable to their revisionist agenda. Needless to say, there is no comparable insistence on proper provision for the theologically orthodox! Should Evangelicals accept that they are at a disadvantage and fight their corner, or should they retire from the scene and hope that their absence will discredit the whole process?

It is a terrible dilemma and the best hope must be that a sufficiently large number of bishops will realise the problem and refuse to implement the strategy in their dioceses. That would not necessarily commit them to any one position, but it would be a recognition that the process is flawed and that consensus is unattainable. Meanwhile we must face the fact that this question will not go away anytime soon. The revisionists will not give up until they have won their case, and they will use every trick in the book to do so. Already, the brave declaration of the Southwark Diocesan Evangelical Union, which calls on the bishop and higher

clergy to maintain traditional Biblical standards, has been spun into a 'contribution' to the facilitated conversations, which it most certainly is not. The same has happened with a well-intentioned meeting between the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) and Changing Attitude, in spite of the fact that the CEEC expressly stated that it was *not* to be understood in that light.

If the revisionists are defeated at this stage, as they may well be, they will invoke the might of the secular press and start a campaign against the Church which has denied them their 'rights' and fallen into the hands of obscurantist clerics. They may even persuade Sir Elton John to boycott us along with Dolce and Gabbana! We must not underestimate this danger and have to be prepared for a long, hard battle ahead. In the process we must rediscover that the Gospel is not about worldly power and influence but about dying and rising with Christ. The outward forms of the Church may be assailed but the Spirit of God cannot be thwarted by earthly means. The devil will do his best, but the gates of hell will not prevail against it. If we are to see this through, we must change our own attitudes before we try to change those of others. Are we prepared to stand up for Jesus, even when the cost is high? Will we accept public ridicule because we are standing up for the truth? Are we so afraid of disestablishment that we will compromise the Gospel in order to preserve our increasingly imaginary secular privileges? Generations of Christians have had to face this question, and those who were faithful unto death knew what their answer had to be. Let us hope and pray that we in our generation will not be found wanting.

GERALD BRAY