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Churchman

EDITORIAL

National apostasy

At last it seems that the dust stirred up by the women bishops controversy may be starting to settle. It is sad that the church has had to continue debating the terms of the provisions that will be made for the minority opposed to having them, but the responsibility for that rests squarely on the shoulders of those who thought that they could muster enough votes in General Synod to force their own will on that minority, despite all the promises that they would be treated fairly. The extreme and often intemperate reactions by some of the pro-women group to their unexpected defeat have demonstrated, as nothing else could have done, just how necessary legal protection for the minority is, and it must be hoped that all sides will now get on with finding the best way to ensure this. We cannot expect that many people will like the final result, but with a little good will and encouragement, it should be possible to find a solution that both sides can live with, even if it is not what they would have chosen.

It is time to move on, not least because the next controversy is already looming. It concerns the way in which the church will deal with practising homosexuals, and promises to make the fuss over women bishops look like child's play. One thing the two issues have in common is the desperate need for clarity. Too often, people engage in debate without being properly informed and from standpoints that reflect their own prejudices. Reasoned argument is difficult, if not impossible, in such circumstances and the result is all too likely to be bruised feelings that make those who have them incapable of rising to anything higher. That is what has happened to many of the supporters of women bishops, and there is no reason to suppose that things will be any different next time round. There is the additional factor that, unlike the women bishops issue, the homosexual question is far more than an internal church matter. Whether we like it or not, it reflects (and is strongly influenced by) rapidly shifting social trends that the church cannot ignore.

In the interests of clarity, the first thing that has to be said is that Christian teaching on homosexuality has always been perfectly clear. To engage in sexual activity with a person of the same sex is a sin. The Bible seldom mentions the subject, but what it says is uniformly negative. It

would be far easier to make a case for allowing polygamy than it would be for blessing same-sex marriage, though nobody seems to be advocating that—at least not yet. The weight of Scripture and tradition on this subject is overwhelming and no hermeneutical sleight of hand can alter that fact. There have always been homosexual people in the church and not a few have been ordained to its ministry, but that has never influenced its teaching, which has remained constant through the ages.

The second thing that has to be said is that the church has never excluded anyone because of his or her sexual orientation. What it has censured is sexual practice that does not conform to the Word of God as set down in the Scriptures. That Word authorises one of two states of life for Christians—the choice is between celibacy and lifelong heterosexual monogamy. Each of these has a long and honourable tradition behind it and must be respected. Evangelical Christians sometimes think that ‘celibacy’ smacks of Catholicism, so they need to be reminded that the New Testament prefers it to marriage, whilst recognising that it is a gift given to the few. Those who cannot maintain it are permitted to take a spouse, but if they do so, they must remain faithful to him or her as long as they live. Divorce and remarriage during the lifetime of a previous partner are not permitted (except in the case of an innocent victim of adultery) any more than homosexual practice is—a point that needs to be remembered in the present debates. Those who defend the traditional Biblical teaching must not close their eyes to heterosexual sin while lambasting the homosexual variety; the law of Christ applies to the one just as much as it does to the other. It would be the height of hypocrisy for Evangelical Christians to denounce homosexual ‘marriage’ whilst saying nothing about serial polygamy among heterosexuals, which is just as unacceptable to God.

Thirdly, homosexual practice cannot be reduced to the level of social mores that can change from one social context to another. There is no ground for saying that modern Western society has evolved towards a ‘higher’ understanding of such things than that found in previous generations or in other cultures today. It is wrong because it goes against the law of God, which is clearly stated in Genesis and maintained unchanged throughout the Bible. This law consists of two central elements, one of which relates to creation and the other to redemption.

With respect to creation, God made male and female to complement each other. Monogamous marriage is the most intimate way in which this is manifested, but it is not the only one. Men are enjoined to treat all women as they would their sisters or mothers, and we may assume that the same applies to women in their dealings with men. Sexual intercourse with all and sundry is ruled out, and even to think about such a thing is as bad as idolatry, or even incest. How men and women work together will vary according to circumstances, but neither can do without the other and whatever the precise details may be, a balance must be struck if the human

race is to survive and prosper. Every human being has a biological mother and a father, however unsatisfactory they may be, and the pretence that a child can have two parents of the same sex is just that—a pretence. This is the way God made us and we are not free to alter or reject his plan of creation.

Whether God made people with homosexual desires already implanted in them is impossible to say. We cannot blithely assume that those feelings can only be the result of the fall, any more than we can claim that alcoholism, kleptomania or even poor eyesight are the fruit of sin. There is nothing in the Bible to say that Adam and Eve were perfect specimens of humanity who would never have had toothache or caught a cold—as far as we can tell, the flesh has always been subject to the challenges and limitations of life on earth. The book of Job was written to tell us this. Jesus did not promise his followers that they would be healed of all their afflictions. The Apostle Paul was specifically told that he would have to live with the thorn in his flesh, because it is in our weakness that his saving strength is revealed and glorified. Despite what some people think, we do not claim that homosexual desire is a disorder that can be cured; it is a fact of life that we have to deal with by refusing to give into it, just as Adam and Eve were told they must not give into the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit.

As fallen human beings we all fail to do what God has commanded us, however good our intentions may be, and we need to be corrected. This brings us to the second element in this analysis, which is the meaning and scope of redemption. The Son of God did not come into the world in order to affirm us in our fallen state but to condemn us for it—and then to take the condemnation on himself, so that we may be delivered from its consequences. We are sinners saved by grace, men and women who have no good thing in us but who are enabled to live a new kind of life by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. The old life and its temptations are still with us, but by the grace of God we can be set free from them and live a new and different kind of life. It does not matter whether I am tempted to deny my marriage vows or to sleep with someone of the same sex—both are wrong and my calling before God is to resist the temptation to sin against him.

One of the most disturbing things about the homosexual debate is the assumption on the part of many that because same-sex attraction is a natural orientation for some people it must be accepted as God's will for them, even if it is not the tendency of the majority. Homosexual people are accordingly classified as 'oppressed' and their case becomes one of 'minority rights,' a discourse that removes the question from the moral to the juridical sphere and makes 'justice' for the victims seem to be almost essential. The danger for Christians who oppose this is that they may be fooled by the apparent logic of this argument. Did God make some

people homosexual? Does the continuing presence of same-sex attraction in believing Christians mean that we must accept it as a valid expression of our redeemed standing before God?

This is a very tricky subject and we have to get our theology right if we are going to tackle it effectively. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that homosexual orientation, or anything else for that matter, is the direct result of the fall of Adam. As far as we can tell, Adam and Eve were mortal beings who were protected from harm in the Garden of Eden, but when they disobeyed God, that protection was removed. Their physical nature was not changed, nor was it diminished in any way. Our first parents became subject to the power of Satan because they had obeyed him instead of God, and they suffered the consequences of that.

What evidence is there for this view? The Genesis account tells us that Adam and Eve had freedom to choose what they would do and were given the responsibility for taking the right decisions. They were not immune to temptation, but when that occurred, they were expected to say 'no'—as Eve in fact did at first. In other words, they were supposed to be guided in their behaviour by the command that God had given to them, whatever fancy or alien spiritual power might have persuaded them to act otherwise. Human sexuality certainly existed in the Garden, and so we must assume that had the human race multiplied there, it would have been exposed to sexual temptation just as much as it was to every other kind. The only reason that did not happen to Adam and Eve was because there was no scope for it; it was not because they were somehow immune to it or because sexual practice before the fall was a matter of free choice.

In the modern world, those who advocate the legitimacy of homosexual relationships have rejected the Biblical view of humanity and the fall. Some have done this openly and turned away from the church, recognising that our values are incompatible with theirs. We must regret this, but at the same time we ought to respect their honesty and agree with the logic of their analysis. What they want to do is not possible within the bounds of Christian faith, and if they are not prepared to submit their desires to the lordship of Christ then membership of the church is not for them. This is difficult for Anglicans, but we have to face the fact that what we are witnessing is national apostasy on a scale that John Keble could never have imagined when he preached his famous assize sermon on that subject back in 1833. Then it was the issue of whether a minority of dissenters from the Church of England should be given equal rights in civil society that prompted Keble and his fellow high-churchmen to react, but today the question is very different. What we are faced with is the prospect that a non- (or even anti-) Christian majority will try to force its will on those who still cling to the faith—and drag the Church of England along with them.

It would be simple if all gay activists were consistent and left (or ignored) the national Church, but they do not. There are lay people, like those politicians who advocate liberalising the law of the land, who also claim to be practising Christians. It is true that a case can be made for holding this apparently contradictory position, and it should not be dismissed out of hand. Abortion on demand, for example, or unrestricted remarriage after divorce, may be justified in purely secular terms even when it is forbidden by the law of God. Regulating such practices may be the best way forward for the stability of the state, but setting bounds to the practice of evil is not the same thing as advocating what the church cannot regard as acceptable behaviour for its own members. Even in England, where church and state are interconnected, the state has always permitted the church to refuse to remarry divorcees and it now intends to make same-sex marriage in church illegal.

Some people think that this is heavy-handed, but the fact that the church does not necessarily follow the dictates of state policy is well-established in law and the argument that a state church must conform to the mores of a secular society has no validity. Those who live in both worlds must accept that they do not always overlap and that there are times when something will be legal but at the same time immoral and unacceptable among Christians. Same-sex marriage is one such thing. The sad fact is that 'gay weddings' have to be prohibited by law because if they are not, a clergyman could conduct them without being disciplined. He would not be breaking the law of the land and it is most unlikely that the church would risk the bad publicity it would get if it tried to impose canonical obedience on its clergy in what many would see as a matter of individual conscience. Using the law to ban gay weddings in church is not an ideal solution, but in the circumstances it is the only one that can be made to work effectively.

There must be no mistaking the power of the opposition that we face as we try to defend and implement Biblical standards in this controversial area. The media are very much on the side of the homosexual community, and use all their power to present its demands in the best possible light. Opponents know that they will be ignored or denigrated, and there is every indication that public opinion is already being manipulated against them. We are regularly told that polls show a majority in favour of same-sex marriage, but nobody says who has been polled or what the wording of the question asked actually was. The feeling that many people are indifferent to what does not affect them personally, but recoil from the homosexual agenda if it touches them directly is one that we cannot verify, because only a referendum could tell us the answer, and gay activists are determined to avoid that. They would not want to risk losing the vote to what they would see as an ignorant and bigoted public.

We must also not be blind to the increasingly open opposition that we face within the church itself. Back in 2005 the bishops were persuaded to permit civil partnerships among the clergy as long as they were celibate—a joke that was perceived as such at the time and that has done nothing to increase the credibility of the episcopate as defenders of the faith. Now we are told that they are being advised to allow people in such partnerships to be considered for preferment—a scandal that, if it is permitted to go ahead, will only increase the likelihood that they will cave in completely to the prevailing social trends. We must not forget that once the legislation on same-sex marriage is passed, civil partnerships will almost certainly be phased out, probably by being converted into the new category of ‘marriage.’ Will the bishops move down the same path, or will they finally see the error of their previous ways and retract their ill-considered decision before it is too late? We wish that the answer to that question were obvious, but who would dare to suggest that it is?

In the days ahead, an unusually heavy burden will fall on the shoulders of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Like it or not, he is the public spokesman for the Church of England and widely respected across the Anglican Communion. His personal opposition to the homosexual agenda is well-known and acknowledged by its promoters and opponents alike. He knows, both from his own commitment to Christ and the assurance that he is getting from others who share it, that that agenda is wrong and must be resisted. Will he have the courage to do so consistently and effectively? Will those who think as he does be prepared to stand up and be counted alongside him as he faces the barrage of opposition that he is bound to be subjected to? He did not ask for his position but in a time of crisis he has been called to defend the Word of God and the integrity of the church that seeks to proclaim that Word to the nation. Let us assure him that if he is prepared to stand and fight for the cause of Christ, then we shall be behind him and prepared to glorify the Lord in being ready to be counted as witnesses to his truth and to his will for his people.

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