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Churchman

EDITORIAL

To have and to hold

Over the last couple of decades, Christians have learned to cringe when they hear that some Anglican body has just produced a statement about human sexuality. Even if they do not know what the document contains, they are fairly certain that it will mark a serious departure from the Biblical norms that have governed our behaviour for the past two thousand years. In parts of the Anglican Communion things have reached the stage where it is surprising to find any positive statement about traditional family values, which some people think is a right-wing ploy used to justify the oppression of women, homosexuals and so on. The Church of England has moved more slowly down the path towards sexual liberation than some other Anglican churches have, partly because it is so large and unwieldy, and partly because it has a special responsibility to keep the lines of communication open between the vocal minority of first-world 'progressives' and 'traditionalists' everywhere.

In recent months, we have had a curious report from a working party chaired by the bishop of Sodor and Man, suggesting that men (and eventually also women) in civil partnerships should be considered for the episcopate. It is not clear what status that report has, and as far as anyone can tell, its recommendations have been put on hold because we are awaiting a more comprehensive report by a committee chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling, which is due out later in 2013. What it will say is impossible to guess, but if past performance is any guide, Sir Joseph may use his influence to bow further in the direction of 'traditionalist' opinion than some of his committee members might like. It was he, after all, who pointed out that Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics are both seriously under-represented in the house of bishops, and who dared to recommend that this injustice should be remedied. To nobody's surprise, that report has sunk without trace, but Sir Joseph himself has lived to see another day and there is some hope that he will show a similar independence of mind this time round.

At the same time, there are rumours that his report will seek to accommodate people in same-sex relationships by offering them some kind of blessing in church. If that is true, it might as well be said that the document is as good as dead right now. The reactions to that conclusion

are already well known and they are unlikely to be toned down—rather the reverse. In such a scenario, it is probable that the hierarchy, ever anxious to preserve the delicate balance in the church between those who believe in God and those who do not, may have no choice but to come down in favour of the believers, especially as they have so recently bent over backwards to satisfy the other side on the issue of women bishops. Fresh from that victory, the liberals may have to wait a while before moving on to their next conquest, and if so, the next Pilling report may be sacrificed to the need to maintain peace in the wider church.

Whatever way one looks at it, the picture appears to be bleak. Wounded liberals do not take kindly to defeat, and we can be certain that they will spare no effort to get their agenda accepted. Any interim victory for the orthodox will be precarious and we must expect to see it overturned at the first available opportunity. It is therefore both surprising and exciting to report that, against all the current trends, the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England has just issued an excellent document called *Men and Women in Marriage*, which has received the *imprimatur* of both archbishops and has been offered to the wider church ‘for study.’

Rather than go over the grounds on which the Church opposes same-sex marriage, the report takes it for granted that such a thing is unacceptable to Christians, and so has decided to take a completely different approach. Instead of criticising and condemning what it cannot agree with, the Commission has set out the case for heterosexual monogamy in a positive way. Hard as it will be for dedicated Church-watchers to believe, its report says things like: ‘It is on male and female that God gives his blessing, which is to be seen not only in procreation, but in human culture too (Genesis 1:27–8).’ Those who have not yet fallen off their perch in shock can go on to read: ‘Public discussion at this juncture needs a clear view of why Christians believe and act in relation to marriage as they do, and this statement is offered as a resource for that.’ (Para. 4).

Unusually for an Anglican report, there is no beating about the bush, no suggestion that ‘Christians’ might have many (mutually incompatible) views on the subject, not even a plea to the Church to ‘listen’ to the radicals who want to undo everything it has always taught. What we get instead is a clear and forthright proclamation of the Word of God. The Commission is not blind to the calling of celibacy, nor does it forget that marriage has frequently been romanticised in unhelpful ways. It admits that at different times and in different places, monogamy has not been maintained as faithfully as it should have been, but points out that aberrations have been relatively few and almost always heterosexual in nature. It is not even afraid to use the taboo word ‘procreation,’ which it insists is a fundamental part of marriage, even in those cases where

there is no prospect of a couple actually having children (see Para. 21). The advantages of a home with two parents, one of each sex, are laid out in considerable detail, and the postmodern notion that marriage is a free union of two people with no wider significance is knocked firmly on the head. It is all so astonishing that one is tempted to ask where the Commission has been lately—with Jesus, perhaps?

That seems to be a real possibility, since after laying the groundwork, their report goes on to talk about the nature of freedom as the New testament teaches it. The discipline of heterosexual marriage is ‘not a mere constraint, a form we must accept and conform to somehow; it is a vocation to holiness, a path of discipleship by which we are opened to the life of the Spirit of God...’ Not only that, but ‘it is one of the central means through which the continuation of the development of the personality occurs, offering healing and growth on the basis of progressive mutual completion.’ (Para. 31). Those with the stomach for it can pursue this theme for several more pages, on which the joys of having children, the beauty of faithfulness and the solemnity of ‘sacramental’ union are all celebrated. The Commission recognises that the use of the word ‘sacrament’ in the matrimonial context is potentially confusing, since marriage is neither an ordinance of the Gospel nor incumbent on all believers, but it must be understood in the light of the report’s conclusion: ‘The encounter of man and woman in marriage affords an image...of the knowledge and love of God, to which all humans are summoned, and of the self-giving of the Son of God which makes it possible.’ (Para. 40).

After a mountain-top experience like this, the descent to the plain is bound to be a little jarring, but it has to come eventually and it duly does, in the section devoted to the relationship of the state to the church in marriage. Here, it must be said, the Commission is less sure-footed. The report looks back to the time when marriages were regulated by the church rather than by the state, but it does not go back as far as the New Testament, when the reverse was the case. Jesus went to a wedding, but neither he nor his disciples ever performed one, a significant point of which the Commission seems to be unaware. The introduction of holy matrimony in the middle ages was actually a reform that was not only designed to secure the permanence of the marriage being entered into, but also to protect the rights of women who could all too easily be divorced in ancient Rome.

The failure to recognise this is unfortunately a sign that deeper waters lie ahead that the report has not managed to negotiate very well. This can be seen most clearly in Paragraph 48, which mentions three areas that in the Commission’s view require further study. The first of these is remarriage after divorce, the second is polygamy (apparently confined to Africa and so of dubious relevance to the Church of England), and the third is civil partnerships. In each of these cases, it is claimed that

'accommodations' have been made to allow for exceptional circumstances and the suggestion is put forward that if these accommodations are well-designed, they will 'proclaim the form of life given by God's creative goodness and bring those in difficult positions into closer approximation to it.' (Para. 49). As the worldly-wise will immediately pick up, it is here that critics of the report have seen an open door to permissiveness—as one of them put it, the Church has given a green light to those who want to practise same-sex marriage, as long as they accept that they are in a minority and (preferably) call it something else.

The surefootedness that dominates the bulk of the report seems to have deserted the Commission at the end. The fact that it has bracketed polygamy with divorce and civil unions betrays this. African polygamy is tolerated only when it is already being practised at the time of conversion, and although polygamous men may be baptised, they have never been ordained or consecrated as bishops. Nor are Christians allowed to enter into polygamous relationships. Unfortunately, the same discipline does not apply to those who have been divorced or who are in civil partnerships, and here the Commission unwittingly reveals just how unsatisfactory the Church's current 'accommodations' in these areas are. Divorce and remarriage, even among the clergy, is becoming increasingly common, because almost every circumstance is 'exceptional' to those caught in it. As for civil partnerships, some bishops have publicly stated that they will not apply the rules, which makes a nonsense of the whole thing.

There is no reason to suppose that the majority of the Commission's members are happy with this situation, but what can they do? They have inherited more than a decade of indiscipline and cannot easily repudiate what their predecessors have done. But they must know as well as anyone that it is here that the main battles will be fought. On the question of divorce, what is wrong with saying that the remarriage of divorced people should take place in a civil ceremony and that the couple may then be blessed by the Church when the circumstances make that appropriate? This policy has already been in effect for a long time and it seems to have worked reasonably well. It may not be the perfect solution, but what is? At least this one maintains the principle of the indissolubility of marriage (which the Commission wants to support) without being unkind or unfair to those who are seeking a second chance after having failed the first time round. Unfortunately what we are seeing across the Church is a growing laxity in this area, that extends even to the ordination of divorced people who have been remarried, all of whom, we may be sure, are examples of 'exceptional circumstances' that in most cases probably ought to be discounted.

Civil partnerships are another minefield that will have to be addressed sooner rather than later. They are already recognized by the courts as *de facto* marriages, and are likely to be phased out once same-sex matrimony

receives state approval. It is an open scandal that clergy are currently permitted to enter into these unions (as long as they claim to be ‘celibate,’ whatever that means), but what will happen once the law changes? Will they be allowed to ‘upgrade’ their relationships, and if not, what option will be open to them and to those who want to enjoy the same kind of relationship in the future? It ought to be obvious that since no clergyman is allowed to preside at a civil partnership ceremony, no member of the Church—and certainly no *ordained* member of it—ought to be allowed to enter into that kind of relationship. If they do, their membership should be terminated and in the case of clergy, their ordination should be voided. But here the inevitable question arises—have we already gone too far in sin for these tendencies to be reversed? One senses that some members of the Faith and Order Commission think that it is still not too late to take action, and that they would like to do just that, but will they (or the bishops) have the courage to press on towards the goal of serious reform?

Having said that, let us give praise where praise is due. The Faith and Order Commission has reminded us that as Christians, we have a precious inheritance in lifelong heterosexual monogamy, and it wants us to hold onto that. To have and to hold—that is what it is all about, and it is to the promises made to those who do so that we must all, in our different ways, bear witness in the difficult days that lie ahead.

GERALD BRAY