

A RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSED 'PRAYERS OF LOVE AND FAITH' FOR SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS AND CALLS FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND TO BLESS AND CONDUCT SAME-SEX WEDDINGS.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our own Bishop Steven Croft recently found himself responding to calls for his resignation. Having advocated for a change to Christian doctrine and law to enable same-sex weddings in church, he wrote:

...I am advocating a change in the present position of the Church. Some have argued that the only way to do this with integrity would be to resign my office first, since as a bishop it is my responsibility to uphold Christian doctrine. I respect this view and those who hold it, but dissent from it because I believe this subject is of such importance for the whole life and mission of the Church. (see Bishop Steven's book 'Together in Love and Faith', 2022)

This caused me to reflect on what grounds a clergyman should resign. We are none of us perfect and indeed confess repeatedly that we are sinners and in need of repentance and forgiveness. We are never without contrition and yet we must function, so what are the boundaries? Popularity is an unlikely mark of faithful ministry given the words of our Lord Jesus Christ who said:

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Matt 5:11

You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. Matt 10:22

The Church of England has processes which set boundaries around ministry for Capability, Competency and Conduct. It also has creeds, oaths and declarations which set boundaries around faith. Perhaps we can say that as a matter of conscience, clergy ought to self-regulate, and seek help when they fail to measure up or otherwise resign if they intend to break faith with these boundaries? Such a decision is a matter of conscience to the individual. Church authorities ought to offer appropriate support or sanction where necessary.

This coming week General Synod is meeting and on the [agenda](#) are the newly proposed prayers and order of service for same-sex couples (for full details see:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/29241>).

The House of Bishops has confirmed that the Church of England's Doctrine remains unchanged:

"The Church of England continues to hold the received understanding of Holy Matrimony as between one man and one woman, as set forth in its canons and authorised liturgies. There is a range of positions held among the bishops and there is not sufficient consensus to propose a change to this. Bishops have also agreed that the conversations about these, and related matters, need to continue in a spirit of love and grace."

The House of Bishop's motion explains:

"Bishops recognise the diversity of committed relationships that exist both in the Church and in wider society today. Bishops joyfully affirm, and want to acknowledge in church, stable, committed relationships between two people – including same-sex relationships. To enable this to happen bishops plan to commend a resource under the heading Prayers of Love and Faith. A draft version can be found in [Annex B](#).

As with all commended material, the use of Prayers of Love and Faith will be at the discretion of the minister."

They go on to explain that the prayers: *"will not contradict the Church's doctrine of Holy Matrimony, as articulated in Canon B30."*

The proposals have been publicly challenged, as has been widely reported. Campaigners who support same-sex marriage feel the proposals do not go far enough and are discriminatory. Others, advocating for the doctrine articulated above, point out that the prayers do contradict the doctrine of marriage and repudiate the Bible and the [39 Articles of Religion](#).

ARTICLE XX. (20) OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

THE Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.

This is an important and emotive subject, so please pray for wisdom, clarity and unity. Please pray for all those who may find this debate hurtful. Please pray for God's will to be done and the truth and authority of the Bible which is God's word to be upheld. Should you wish to discuss the proposals and the issues involved, I would welcome such conversation and am interested to hear your thoughts on these prayers in the same 'spirit of love and grace'.

All clergy, both Priests and Bishops have made the following declaration:

The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. In the declaration you are about to make, will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making Him known to those in your care?

I, A B, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will use only the forms of service which are authorized or allowed by Canon.

C.S. Lewis once spoke on this issue, calling for men of honesty to make clear their allegiance and boundaries:

And here at the outset I must deal with an unpleasant business. It seems to the layman that in the Church of England we often hear from our priests doctrine which is not Anglican Christianity. It may depart from Anglican Christianity in either of two ways: (1) It may be so

'broad' or 'liberal' or 'modern' that it in fact excludes any real Supernaturalism and thus ceases to be Christian at all. (2) It may, on the other hand, be Roman. It is not, of course, for me to define to you what Anglican Christianity is—I am your pupil, not your teacher. But I insist that wherever you draw the lines, bounding lines must exist, beyond which your doctrine will cease either to be Anglican or to be Christian: and I suggest also that the lines come a great deal sooner than many modern priests think. I think it is your duty to fix the lines clearly in your own minds: and if you wish to go beyond them you must change your profession. This is your duty not specially as Christians or as priests but as honest men. (C.S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics" (1945) included in God in the Dock (Eerdmans, 1970) 89-90.)

Archbishop Justin Welby appears to be advocating for a unity in diversity, upholding the value of both opinions and continuing to journey together. Can such an approach work? I don't believe it can for the following reasons which I will explain as succinctly as I can with respect to the gravity of the matter. I asked Bishop Steven to put his views in writing, no doubt others did too; we wanted to understand his position. So I have read it and listened carefully, I hope I have understood the nuances of his position accurately. I appreciate his honesty in setting out his position and attention to Holy Scripture in so doing. He has called our diocese to compassion, contemplation and courage in our Christian walk. He certainly expresses deep compassion as his motivation, has contemplated Scripture, experience and the views of others and it must have taken courage to express an aberrant view. He doesn't seem to agree with Justin Welby entirely and recognises a need for what he calls "differentiation of provision and oversight". This is a recognition that doctrine matters and he is calling for a change in it. Views can be so contrary that while groups might still respect and love each other, they cannot be identified together. Hence why several notable clergy, including Archbishops and scholars, have published refutations and invited repentance. These are worth considering at length and I am only intending to briefly highlight what are for me the key issues.

In other parts of the Anglican Communion there has been a parting of ways along the lines of this disagreement. Attempting to accurately represent divergent views... It would appear to be because for the one group, they hold that the traditional view is hateful discrimination, not loving, therefore not of Christ, Christ would bless same-sex marriage because where love is, there God is. For the other group, the issue is not a desire to be apart from LGBTQ+ people or to discriminate but to honour the authority of God and his word, God defines what love is and he only authorised either celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage between one man and one woman for life.

As I understand it, Bishop Steven is trying to find a compromise in which the mainstream would accept the proposed change but also respect the validity of disagreement and have an alternative oversight equivalent to what is offered for those who do not accept the ministry of ordained women. Perhaps the idea of finding some mechanism for journeying together whether with some degree of separation is compassionate? The value of this he seems to take as a given, however, there are reasons to doubt it pragmatically and more importantly the many Scriptural admonitions against any association with people who teach different doctrines than those received. This doctrine is truly novel in the history of the Christian faith and the gravity of that issue is well understood in his handling of the subject matter.

Common Ground

We share a loving concern for the LGBTQ+ community and we share the desire to express the fullness of Christ's love to them, that they be welcome in church and incorporated as full members of church without discrimination or hurt. We share the desire to express our apology and sympathy for the times when this has not happened.

Bishop Steven acknowledges the importance of Scripture in his explanation for his position. He affirms that the authority of Scripture stands and therefore the issue is one of correct interpretation.

We share a desire to follow Christ, a love of Christ, a love for Christ's Church, and to share the gospel of Christ with the world and perhaps much else besides.

Disagreement

I disagree with his desire to change the doctrine of the church and I disagree with the proposed prayers of love and faith. I could not in conscience offer these prayers within the parish and join the many voices objecting to them.

Bishop Steven explains how over time the church has changed its interpretation of certain passages in relation to slavery and the ordination of women. I don't think these issues are analogous. We would agree on the interpretation of the passages about slavery and we would no doubt agree that there is no room in the confession of the church's faith to hold disparate views on this together. Neither of us would accept a fellow clergyman advocating the buying and selling of people! The church has continued to accept different views on the ordination of women, the reasons for which are complex and would require more space than I can give here.

The reason the issue with same-sex marriage is different is because the interpretative principle appears to contravene article 20 above. Biblical interpretation must be sensitive to genre, history, narrative, culture, and our own context and presuppositions but it must also be holistic because of the nature and unity of God. In his perfection, he does not contradict himself. For that reason, we cannot interpret one part of scripture in such a way as it overrides another part. We have to accept that all scripture is God-breathed, it is all the word of God! As we confess each time we read it 'This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.'

Bishop Steven calls into question the meaning of those passages, is it something else which is prohibited, e.g. abusive adult with youth relationships? Were the Biblical writers unaware of the modern phenomenon of faithful, loving, stable same-sex relationships? Admittedly the application of Scripture to a truly novel situation is complex, the ethics and utility of Artificial Intelligence is an interest we both share. I don't think the meaning of these passages is ambiguous, and the clear consensus of both ancient and recent scholarship is against his reading, including the majority of contemporary queer theologians who tend to charge the Bible with being in error rather than being misread. Indeed a brief visit to the Ashmolean Museum and exploring the many exhibits I found plenty of evidence of an understanding of same-sex peer relationships and romanticism. The ancient world was certainly familiar with same-sex relationships.

That in briefest terms explains why I would hold to the church's teaching on marriage but the synod motion claims that the proposed prayers of love and faith are in keeping with the doctrine of Holy Matrimony. This rests on a legal opinion which draws a distinction between civil matrimony and holy matrimony which a number of Bishops, Archbishops and others have called into question including many of the most notable campaigners for same-sex marriage.

To those who are in a same-sex relationship and wish to be married, these prayers dumb down their relationship and describe it as something different than it is. A bond of friendship but not of sexual intimacy.

To those in marriages which were not conducted in church, it calls into question the validity of their marriages before God. E.g. Rev Paul Roberts (one of my tutors who is an advocate for same-sex marriages) has published on this.

To those, like myself who feel it incumbent upon us to uphold the doctrine we have committed to in faith and by ordination, the prayers appear to be misleading and misguided. We are ordained to minister reconciliation through a call to repentance from sin. Sin leads to death according to the Bible. Jesus came that we might have life and have it to the full. To bless what the Bible calls sin would be to lead people to death and hell rather than eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Some believe that same-sex sexual relations are either a loving gift from God to be blessed and celebrated while others hold that they are sinful. I don't think these views can be reconciled or held together. If it is sinful then our Holy Orders are to call for repentance, to admonish and to administer forgiveness.

Truly I accept that might be painful to hear but all calls to repentance are painful to hear. The ground is level at the foot of the Cross, which is to say, we all of us need forgiveness for something. Truly a life of discipleship is a dying to self, a dying with Christ, a humbling but it is also a healing, a resurrection life and a joyful life. Nobody of any gender or sexual orientation is excluded from the invitation to follow Christ but there is also nobody of any gender or sexual orientation for whom to follow Christ will not require sacrifice, self-denial and repentance which is to say to follow the call to live at odds with our natural desires and instead live by the Spirit of God, conforming our desires and conduct to the word of Christ.

I have previously raised my concerns with Bishop Steven as have others. I continue to hope and pray that through a courageous and compassionate contemplation of the Holy Scriptures we will come to agree. I think his desire to be compassionate has unfortunately confused his interpretation. I hope anyone who disagrees with me will understand my motivation is also compassion and not any kind of prejudice.

This proposed change in doctrine has caused huge division and conflict in other parts of the Anglican communion. I am desperately sad to imagine such pain and conflict in the Church of England, a pain many of us have only begun to appreciate. The potential divisiveness of this new and patently false doctrine is deeply concerning. We would all do well to contemplate the experiences of Anglicans in North America, Canada, New Zealand etc. Can we work through this graciously? I also hope and pray the Church of England will not break up over this issue but will affirm and hold to its true faith.

I wonder if part of the way forward is to rediscover the gift and virtue of celibacy so highly prized and respected by the church throughout the centuries. I wish to state clearly that anyone holding and teaching this false doctrine ought to recognise it is divergent with Christian faith, received and in Holy Scripture and that it is unfair of the Bishops to bypass our synodical governance to impose it on everyone. If the House of Bishops finally approves these prayers, it will break up the Church of England and break up the global Anglican Communion. This is in no way intended to be hurtful and is grounded entirely in open and honest dialogue, such views are the invention of a novel religion and I join my voice with those asking Bishops who promote them to rethink and renege on this divisive course of action.

It would certainly be helpful to make your views known graciously and succinctly to our Bishops and synod reps as they prepare to meet.

yours in Christ,

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Vicar of Chalfont St Peter Parish Churches
4 Feb 2023