

The current and unchanged doctrine of the Church

What is this doctrine?

The report refers to “the Church of England’s teaching on marriage as expressed in Canon B30” (18, cf. 61, legal para 7). Some conservatives have expressed concern that this is simply to say we will not accept same-sex marriage but leaves other vital areas open to change. That, however, would be a misreading of the report.

First, although reference is regularly made just to the teaching or doctrine of marriage (e.g. 34, 61) at the key statement of the position in para 26 it is clear that there is to be no change to “the Church of England’s existing doctrinal position on marriage *and sexual relationships*” (italics added). As [Andrew Davison has pointed out](#) these addition three words are vitally important. They are not, however, the only evidence in the report that more than the definition of marriage as male and female is being reaffirmed. Indeed, [as Martin Davie has argued](#), it is impossible to separate off Anglican and catholic teaching on marriage from teaching on sexual relationships.

Second, the canon not only refers to marriage as a union “of one man with one woman” but also as being given for “the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections”. This makes clear that part of the Christian doctrine of marriage is teaching about sexual relationships more generally and that sex outside of marriage is not holy or rightly directed.

Third, the legal advice (para 9) is clear that “the Church of England’s teaching” is as set out in the 2005 statement on civil partnerships which quotes the 1999 teaching document:

The Church of England teaches that “sexual intercourse, as an expression of faithful intimacy, properly belongs within marriage exclusively” (Marriage: a teaching document of the House of Bishops, 1999). Sexual relationships outside marriage, whether heterosexual or between people of the same sex, are regarded as falling short of God’s purposes for human beings.

Fourth, the report itself is clear, in relation to what clergy need to understand, that the Church’s teaching remains that sexual relations are “properly conducted only within heterosexual marriage” (54).

How is this doctrine to be taught?

The major task that lies ahead related to reaffirmation of this teaching is the writing and agreeing of a “new Teaching Document on Marriage and Relationships” (23b, 34-35). This will replace or expand upon (but it seems not contradict) the 1999 document on marriage and the 1991 *Issues*. Clearly agreeing the content of this will prove another major challenge for the bishops and those involved.

The difficulties we will face are already evident in the outline offered in para 34. They relate in part to what is sketched there. For example, does the welcome recognition of the need to make gay and lesbian voices “heard...in the document” include voices dogmatically opposed to the teaching of the church and what is meant by it “affirming the role of...those in committed relationships (including marriage) within the life of the Christian community” as if “committed relationships” were the primary moral category rather than marriage? Even more significant is what is lacking. There is no reference in the report’s outline to Scripture (or tradition) and its positive vision for human

flourishing as the source of the Church's teaching. While it is understandable that the current report offers little explicit biblical teaching – that is not its aim – Scripture needs to be central in any episcopal teaching document.

There is a proper and real concern that this document should be part of establishing a fresh tone and culture – “a tone that can communicate welcome and support for lesbian and gay people and for those who experience same-sex attraction, and also promote mutual understanding across the Church as a whole” (29). However, the substance it has to communicate “in ways that are both clear and sensitive” is “the teaching of the Church” (29) as set out above. The challenge is how to express the Church's teaching in a way that can be heard to communicate welcome and support to the many people – not just those who identify as LGBT – who are living outside that teaching. In particular, given the major missiological challenge that we appear to be lacking in love, and the gap between church teaching and much of our culture's way of thinking about marriage and sex, how do we do communicate teaching in a way that demonstrates love *through a document* when it can only really be shown through personal relationships and shared life in community?

There is also an important area not directly addressed in the report – how will bishops in their personal ministry embody this renewed commitment to church teaching? It is now vital that individual bishops are no longer silent in this crucial area, simply referring to ongoing conversations as the church seeks to discern where it should go and what its teaching should be. It is now clear what that teaching is and where the bishops as a whole want the church to go and this includes “continuing to affirm unequivocally the doctrine of marriage set out in Canon B 30” (61). Those bishops who are genuinely, personally convinced this is good news need therefore to be teaching it as they model how “to expound it with confidence as the Church's teaching” (61). Those bishops who are not convinced need nevertheless to “be faithful to the teaching of the Church, in their own lives and in their ministry to others” (64), and “not directly and publicly undermine” that teaching (65). If the bishops are not doing this then questions have to be asked as to whether they are genuinely committed to the vision of episcopal oversight which underlies the document and to building the necessary trust for this option to work, particularly in relation to the area of pastoral guidance and the scope of freedom within church teaching.