

The Pilling Report: divisive and damaging?

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The group working with Joseph Pilling reporting to the House of Bishops on the issue of same-sex relations were always going to struggle to keep anyone happy. How is it possible to say something on this issue without upsetting or offending one group or another? And if not, how on earth could anyone find a new paradigm which would keep people talking—no, which would provoke people into a discussion which (according to Oliver O’Donovan) has never really started? Perhaps a measure of success of the report is that (from what I can glean from the blogosphere) people on both sides are equally offended. Some see it as ‘**right veering**’ and others as ‘**liberalising**’.

From a (not in fact very ‘conservative’) **evangelical perspective**:

Although the Report mentions a few key Scriptural texts, and claims to ‘desire to place Scripture at the heart of ethics and discipleship’, it does so in the context of saying ‘we do not all believe that the evidence of Scripture points to only one set of ethical conclusions.’ (§235)

Thus, the Report raises a famous question, ‘Did God really say?’ and then finds itself without an answer. To be fair, there are two appendices, one by the Bishop Keith Sinclair (Appendix 3), offering a brief, but rich and insightful overview of the biblical material from a traditional perspective, and one by the Revd David Runcorn, offering a rather less persuasive interpretation from an ‘inclusive evangelical’ perspective (Appendix 4). But rather than taking the time to tease out the possible interpretative options, and to at least establish the loci of disagreement, the report skates over the Scriptural material, and does not succeed in giving it the weight it surely ought to have.

From the other end of the debate, the comment by Colin Coward on behalf of **Changing Attitude**:

The inadequacies of the report result from the theology held as orthodox and traditional by many Christians, belief in the Bible as the literal, inerrant Word of God, and belief in God as a supernatural being, remote from the world, who is primarily a law-giver and rule-maker, judging our lives and behaviour.

The report lacks empathy and compassion for LGB&T people. It lacks the courage needed to free the church from gender and sexuality-based prejudice and hypocrisy. It lacks the vision needed to overcome systemic homophobia in the church.

These are good representatives of the diversity of views existing across the C of E (and elsewhere) which are being expressed again in response to Pilling. On one side, there is the desire for a more serious engagement with Scripture and biblical theology, which many felt was in fact present in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* in 2003—how little we have travelled in 10 years! On the other,

there is a desire for either the experience of the 'LGBT' community, or at the very least sociological and psychological understandings of sexuality, to shape the discussion. The Church of England (at least in recent years) has characteristically wanted to occupy the middle ground—but in this discussion, there simply is no ground in the middle to occupy! I suspect this is why, from both 'sides' of the debate, it feels like 'Make your mind up' time.

Dissent and damage

A striking thing about the report itself is the presence of a long dissenting statement from Keith Sinclair, Bishop of Birkenhead, along with his statement expressing the 'traditional' argument from biblical theology. (In fact, his statement is not *that* traditional in that it does interact well with recent study.) This is not unusual, in that it is normal practice in Anglican reports to include dissenting statements together with the main report in one document. But in this case it highlights the unique difficulty of the situation; the word I remember most from this section was the word 'damaging', which could hardly be a stronger expression of dissent.

I hope to comment in due course on the question of biblical engagement, both within the report itself and as represented by the cases outlined by Keith Sinclair and David Runcorn as two 'evangelical' perspectives.

But the most striking thing about the proposals in the report is the tension between two key issues:

- On the one hand, the statements that '**It is not a new policy statement from the Church of England**' and that 'The recommendations do not propose any change in the church's teaching on sexual conduct' (both from the press release);
- On the other hand, the proposal for the allowance of service to 'mark' same-sex civil partnerships, not using formally and nationally approved liturgy (since that would imply a change of doctrine) but locally developed (i.e. at a diocesan level) possibly following guidelines issued by the (national) House of Bishops.

Peter Ould **anticipated such a development** prior to the report's publication, and was roundly sneered at by the bloggerati—but what has been proposed is not far from what he predicted (not surprisingly).

It is this tension that I think is divisive—but not in the way illustrated by the opening quotations.

1. It divides the local from the national

The idea that churches or dioceses can innovate in such an important area, and that somehow this can be separated from the notion of a change of doctrine, does seem extraordinary. As Keith Sinclair

points out, it was precisely this sort of separation of the 'local' from the 'global' which is at the root of the tensions with the global Anglican Communion. The Pilling report suggests, in effect, moving this sharp sense of division from outside the Church of England and making it an internal feature of the Church nationally. (This is, in effect, a move to the C of E being congregational; the implications of this would be an end to central diocesan and national funding, and would have implications for many aspects of Establishment too.) What on earth would happen when a diocese loses a bishop who agrees with such services, and appoints one who does not—or vice versa?

2. It divides public perception from official position

One of the key problems the Church has faced over the last ten years has been its inability to communicate theological and spiritual realities in terms that are easily comprehensible. The appointment of Justin Welby as Archbishop has been heralded as initiating a refreshing corrective to this, but the report undoes all this. Any service would be to 'mark' but not to 'bless' civil partnerships—yet 'blessing' has been the universal language of reporting in the media. In fact, Joseph Pilling himself undid this careful distinctive almost immediately by saying 'he would not write a letter of complaint if the press used such language'.

3. It divides the theory from the reality

As the report notes, a key problem in this whole discussion is the long-standing existence of completely diverse views within the Church. And as no less a figure than Jeffrey John highlights, this arose from the practice by 'liberals' since the 1960s of permitting and even encouraging relationships 'on the ground' that were completely contrary to the Church's actual teaching.

It is important to grasp that it is precisely that culture of double-think and turning the blind eye which has created the mess we are in today.

To authorise local services 'marking' civil partnerships whilst at the same time not amending the 'doctrine of the Church' will simply cement this unsquareable circle and make it harder to resolve.

4. It divides 'liturgical' from 'non-liturgical' churches

There is, of course, no such thing as a 'non-liturgical' church, since to be human is to be liturgical, in the sense of having patterns of life, behaviour and worship, and all churches have a liturgy (an acceptable form of words in worship) even if it is not written down. But not all churches (clergy, congregations) appreciate the principle of '**lex orandi, lex credendi**' which is of especial importance in the Church of England. Because we do not have an explicit 'confession', our doctrine is enshrined in our agreed liturgical forms. (That is why the most heated discussions in Synod are always about

liturgical revision.) You yourself might not put much store by formal words of liturgy, but be aware that the next door parish might be amending Anglican doctrine by the words they are using.

This is particularly important in relation to public perception. Few people outside the church read or experience Anglican reports, press releases or statements. What people experience is whatever service they have attended; if they have attended a same-sex 'wedding blessing', that is what they know of the Church's belief.

5. It divides the C of E from other denominations

Whatever the 'official' teaching of the C of E, if the Church is perceived to be authorising the blessing of same-sex relations, then (as Keith Sinclair points out) in one fell swoop it will alienate the Roman Catholic church, the Vineyard, black-led churches, independent evangelicals, a good number of Baptists, and no doubt others as well. This would be an impressive achievement!

There is, though, one area where the Pilling report does not cause a division, but where it should. **It collapses the distinction between present and future.** Discipline within the Church is now so inconsistent that the mere mention of the possibility of services of 'blessing' assumes the status of permission for some clergy. I am already aware of bishops and archdeacons who have been approached (since the report was published) by clergy asking about services marking same-sex unions. The subject line in the emails of course reads 'wedding blessing.'

In a perceptive and detailed piece last July at **Fulcrum**, Andrew Goddard highlighted the problems in separating pastoral discipline from doctrine, in either direction. In relation to changing pastoral discipline, he observes:

4. A change in *discipline* cannot simply appeal to the existence of a *diversity* of opinion as the basis for greater *diversity* in authorised *discipline*. It must also offer reasons why (a) officially acknowledging and sanctioning that greater *diversity* in *discipline* remains consistent with the stated *doctrine* and (b) the new *discipline* is now the best way of responding to longstanding *diversity*.

5. It is unreasonable to change the *discipline* while claiming to uphold the *doctrine* unless it can be convincingly shown that the new *discipline* remains consistent with the *doctrine*.

6. If a change (including authorising greater *diversity*) in *discipline* cannot be shown to be consistent with the *doctrine* then the only reasonable conclusion is that the *doctrine* has been effectively abandoned. It has been replaced in practice either by (a) no doctrine and the purely pragmatic authorization of an expression of a "diversity of opinion" or by (b) a new but unstated doctrine.

It looks very much as though the Pilling report's recommendations, if accepted, places us firmly in the arena set out under point 6. Goddard goes on to put this in context:

7. Faced with the *diversity* of views, a reasoned argument needs to be offered in response to **Archbishop Rowan's argument at the ACC in 2005** that a change in either *doctrine* or *discipline* also requires "an exceptionally strong critical mass to justify it" (and he meant in the Communion and ecumenically not just within one province). This reasoning would need to show (a) that within the longstanding *diversity* there now exists such "an exceptionally strong critical mass" or (b) describe what would constitute it and so justify the change or (c) show why this criterion should no longer be applied.

Do please note whom he is citing here! It does not seem like much progress when the Pilling report is attempting to go back and undo so much history. No wonder Keith Sinclair repeatedly describes the report's recommendations, if followed, as 'damaging' at every level.

But the House of Bishops can rescue this situation relatively easily. Pilling is *not* proposing a change in Church policy or doctrine. They should accept this. Pilling *is* proposing 'facilitated discussions' to deepen our understanding of the issue. Personally, I doubt that these will make any progress at all—but I'm all for increased mutual understanding, even if it is understanding of how much we disagree, so I don't think the HoB could reject this. **But in order to create any credibility at all for these discussions, the bishops need to agree to *and implement* an absolute moratorium on *any* liturgical change, however local and however 'pastorally accommodating.'** The only alternative, as others have **pointed out**, would be a slow and painful death by a thousand (pastoral, local, liturgical) cuts.

In a wonderful moment in the political comedy *Yes, Minister*, a horrified Hacker says to Humphrey: 'Do you mean to say, that when the chips are down, we are responsible?' Humphrey replies smoothly, with no hesitation, 'Minister, our job is make sure the chips stay *up*.' For the Church of England, the chips cannot stay 'up' much longer.