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### THE PILLING REPORT

By Lee Gatiss

The Church of England has now entered another turbulent period of debate over sexuality, which threatens to tear it apart from the inside. The Pilling Report is the nickname given to the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality's report (also known as GS1929), released at the end of November. The small group which put it together was chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling, and has heard testimony from a wide range of groups on the issue of homosexuality over the last two years. There was talk that the Report would not be released to the general public for some time, but we welcome the fact that it has now entered the public domain so that we can all see what the working group are recommending to the bishops.

At its publication, the Archbishops were keen to stress that this Report is not a new official policy document for the Church of England. This should be borne in mind during any future discussions of it. This report will, however, have quite an impact on Church of England politics over the next two years. Like the apostle Jude, in the Bible, I'm sure that we would prefer to discuss the good news of Jesus Christ and the salvation he offers to all. We are constrained, however, to respond to the teaching of those who are changing the gospel into an affirmation of cultural change.

There are some good things in the Report. For a start, it is absolutely right to say that "the Church should repent for the homophobic attitudes it has sometimes failed to rebuke and should stand firmly against it whenever it is to be found." It is also good to have it on paper that "No one should be accused of homophobia solely for articulating traditional Christian teaching on same sex relationships." However, there are, sadly, problems that need to be addressed.

#### **Let's discuss: "Did God really say...?"**

The Report makes a series of recommendations after what it claims is "careful thought and argument." In essence, it finds the Bible's plain teaching unclear and uncertain, and the Church's current (orthodox, traditional, biblical) position, "deeply off-putting to those outside the Church and therefore a serious impediment to mission." It therefore recommends that the Church commit to about two years of "facilitated discussions" on the issue in order to reflect on the differing views held by various groups and discern "what the Spirit is saying to the Church now." God the Holy Spirit continues to speak through his unerring word, the Bible, alluring people to believe and trust in Christ; but we are encouraged to ask "Did God *really* say...?" Adam and Eve's fall was once facilitated in just the same way.

The agenda here is clearly some kind of compromise solution to keep people of unorthodox opinions within the fold. As Archbishop Justin Welby tweeted when the report came out, "Facilitated discussions can produce positive results, as seen in November's General Synod" — putting the negotiations over the women bishops legislation on the same level as discussions about whether we should affirm sex outside of (heterosexual) marriage as an acceptable option for Christians. The Archbishop said he was praying "for a spirit of attentive listening", and yet the kind of listening that seems to be advocated is one which is designed to lead to a negotiated fudge, and the relegation of God's voice to the margins.

The Report recommends that the Church find a way of "honouring and affirming" those who have entered same-sex partnerships, as well as those who experience same-sex attraction but embrace a chaste lifestyle in response to this sinful temptation. But is it really possible to do both? Rather, would this not be pulling the rug out from underneath those faithful Anglicans who seek to live by

the Bible's teaching? Encouraging such diversity church by church creates an unhelpful congregationalism that encourages people, in this consumerist age, to pick which parish they go to based on whichever one allows them most "freedom."

The Report even recommends that a minister (with the PCC's agreement) be allowed to "mark the formation of a permanent same sex relationship", though it stops short of providing an authorised liturgy for this. The fact is, however, that such "gay blessings" will start to be more common unless bishops unambiguously and credibly ban them in their dioceses, because the "facilitated discussion" process encourages experimentation and openness to the idea. Bishops are, however, encouraged by the Report to stop asking "intrusive questions" of their clergy, whatever their sexuality, concerning their sexual purity.

The Pilling Report contains an excellent and courageous "dissenting statement" from the Bishop of Birkenhead, Keith Sinclair. In it, he outlines biblical teaching which he affirms is clear, and warns that the trajectory of the Report will be to lead the Church into a "cultural captivity" that can only "weaken our commitment to God's mission." Bishop Keith is to be commended for his bold statement of orthodoxy on a committee which was unfortunately loaded to come to different conclusions. As Professor Glynn Harrison, a member of General Synod, has said, this "dissenting statement" is an excellent "rallying point for supporters of authentic Christian teaching."

### **The current teaching of the Church of England**

The Pilling Report claims to uphold the Church's teaching but it effectively undermines it in practice. The official position of the Church of England remains the same, and it is worth reminding ourselves what it is. Our doctrine is found, Canon A5 tells us, in Scripture and in such teachings of the early church as are in accordance with Scripture. This can be crystallised in the *Thirty-nine Articles*, which affirm in Article 7 that no Christian is free to disobey God's moral law.

The Old and New Testaments are unambiguously against same-sex sexual relationships, and contain no affirmation of such behaviour, even while they are clearly aware that many believers have experienced and continue to experience same-sex attraction. As 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 puts it, "*Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God*" (ESV). This teaching was re-affirmed many times by the early church.

Further, a motion passed by General Synod in 1987 by 403 votes to 8 (referred to as the 'Higton motion') also stated:

*"This Synod affirms that the biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships is a response to, and expression of, God's love for each one of us, and in particular affirms;*

*(1) that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship.*

*(2) that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion.*

*(3) that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met with a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion.*

*(4) that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, and that holiness of life is particularly required of Christian leaders.”*

The Church is still committed to this motion, which has never been overturned or amended. Likewise, the Lambeth Conference affirmed in 1998 that it, “in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage.” It also recognised “that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation... and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God.” It asserted that it, “while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals”, and that it could not “advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions.” The GAFCON movement has re-affirmed these things in its Jerusalem Declaration (2008) and Nairobi Communiqué (2013).

The easy thing for us to do, in the current climate, would be to respond to our culture’s normalising of homosexual practice by re-thinking the Church’s historic opposition to it. Many people, and especially the younger generation, now feel that there is nothing wrong with same-sex attraction or behaviour, so it seems obvious to many that to attract them we must soften our stance on this issue at some level. The riskier, more radical and more difficult thing to do is to hold on to what the Holy Spirit teaches us in his word about what it means to be holy, and what kind of lifestyle is pleasing to him. Will we take that risk, and pay the cost of discipleship, for the sake of Jesus and the clarity of his gospel call to “Repent and believe the good news”?

### **A response to the Pilling Report**

Church Society Council, meeting on 3rd December 2013, responded to these things by encouraging all its members to distance themselves from homophobia, and work hard to provide faithful pastoral care to all those experiencing same-sex attraction. It particularly commends the new *LivingOut* website (featuring members of Church Society) as a uniquely valuable resource here ([www.livingout.org](http://www.livingout.org)), and Sam Allberry’s excellent book *Is God Anti-Gay?* The Council believes that it would be very unwise to engage in any “facilitated discussions” which are designed to lead to negotiated compromise and are predicated on the supposed ambiguity of the Bible’s teaching, and advises against this. On the other hand, it encourages evangelicals everywhere to engage in clear and open proclamation of the Bible’s counter-cultural but life-transforming message, wherever this is possible. God works through his word, as it is winsomely taught and expounded, to soften hearts and change minds, as we pray. We must never trust to political tactics alone, but engage in debates as evangelicals in an evangelical way.

Furthermore, we encourage all those who seek to follow the risky path of obedience to the Spirit and his word on this issue, to take counsel together in their churches, and in their dioceses. Together, be in touch with your bishops, to communicate your views, and seek to encourage them to *credibly* stand by the official teaching of the Church in their own ministry and exercise of church discipline. You might perhaps ask them their opinion of the “dissenting statement” by Bishop Keith Sinclair, and express your support for him, and request that an absolute moratorium be declared on “marking” (blessing) same-sex relationships in your diocese. Above all, the Council encourages us all to pray, and not despair, in this time of tumult and difficulty. There are many within the church who oppose the liberal agenda on sexuality. With the Lord’s help, this is by no means a lost cause.

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