

The Church of England and Canon A5 / Article VI: An Exercise in Undoing the Reformation

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A5: Of the doctrine of the Church of England. The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.

Article VI: Of the sufficiency of the holy scriptures for salvation. HOLY Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

Article XX. 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 anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.

As evangelicals, we have always held onto the fact that the Historic Formularies are clear that Scripture is the ultimate authority for the Church of England in matters of doctrine. The Formularies are, however, now being interpreted by the House of Bishops in a way that inverts the original intention of the authors and their commitment to the 'literal and grammatical sense' of the Articles.

The Formularies have been 'queered' by interpreting them as if they had been written in a post-modern age. Thus, that which was supposed to protect the Church from unbiblical superstition and Papal pronouncements is now being used to make room for all beliefs. The only caveat to this being that no one particular belief may be enforced or required (apart from this commitment to a world of plural truth).

You may ask, "How has this happened?". The answer is, "Slowly."

Here are just five staging points along the way.

STAGE 1: The Pilling Report (2013)

The Pilling Report both reinterpreted Article VI and questioned the idea that tradition and reason should be subordinated to the Scriptures, by stating that:

- The Scriptures can be believed selectively – not only do things unproved by Scripture not have to be believed, but things that can be proved from Scripture do not have to be believed. [1]

- One cannot be ‘required’ to believe anything that is ‘obviously contrary’ to Scripture BUT that does not preclude the legitimacy of holding such views voluntarily. [2]

- The only view that the Pilling Report challenged is the view that Scripture is both the first and final authority, to which both tradition and reason must be subordinated. [3]

Wonderfully, Bishop Keith Sinclair wrote a Dissenting Report which upheld the first and final authority of Scripture and outlined the clear teaching of Scripture with regards to human sexuality. Sadly, though, this has been ignored by those in authority.

STAGE 2: Grace and Disagreement: Resources for the Shared Conversations (2014)

The Pilling Report recommended a process of ‘facilitated conversations, which became a national program of ‘Shared Conversations’. The materials produced to help participants in these conversations engage with the Scriptures reflected the majority view of the Pilling Report, rather than those put forward by Keith Sinclair:

- They recognised that disagreements about sexuality are not just about different interpretations of the biblical text but about the role of Scripture in the life of the believer. [4]

- But then advocated that the role of the scriptures is to be ‘a source of ethical reflection’ for Christians – thus excluding the view that they have a unique and authoritative role in the life of the believer. [5]

It was for this reason that many members of Reform felt unable, in good conscience, to take part in the Shared Conversations.

STAGE 3: GS 2055: House of Bishops’ Report on Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations (2017)

GS 2055 was presented to General Synod in February by the House of Bishops. It was based on work that had been done by the ‘Bishops’ Reflection Group on Sexuality’, a group that included Rod Thomas and Julian Henderson, but despite their best efforts to ensure the insertion of more orthodox statements the Report was still deeply flawed.

- The House of Bishops acknowledged that for Conservative Evangelicals sexuality is a ‘first order’ issue and that those who read scripture differently come from a ‘parallel conviction’. However, in the next sentence the Report refers to the Bishops’ ‘present determination’ was ‘to remain together as witnesses to the unity of the Triune God’. [6] Thus, suggesting that it is possible to remain together despite ‘first order’ differences.

- The House of Bishops denuded the Historic Formularies of their ‘particular’ status in setting the boundaries of Anglican doctrine, by allowing other sources to be considered as equivalent. [7]

- Then, having removed the boundaries to doctrinal interpretation put in place by the Historic Formularies, the House of Bishops determined that such boundaries that do exist are to be found in the Canons. [8]

- And then they claim that where the Canons are silent the Bishops are free to determine the teaching of the Church. [9]

Thus, if the Scripture can be sidelined because it is ‘unclear’, the Historic Formularies muffled by a myriad of other voices, and the Canons sidelined by ‘pastoral provision’, we are left without any authority, other than the decisions of the House of Bishops.

Despite this, there was no dissenting report and evangelical bishops encouraged General Synod members to ‘Take Note’ on the basis that the Report could have been worse. The House of Clergy narrowly rejected the motion to ‘take note’ of GS2055 – on the basis that the report was too conservative. Very few conservatives voted against the Report, so it is not surprising that the bishops sought to satisfy the more liberal members of General Synod.

STAGE 4: Letter from the Archbishops (2017)

Following the defeat of the Take Note debate the Archbishops wrote an open letter to General Synod members. In it:

- They further diluted the unique authority of Scripture, claiming that the way forward must be ‘founded in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it;’ and that ‘it must be based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships, and in a proper 21st century understanding of being human and of being sexual.’

- They rejected the idea that the disagreement might be ‘first order’ or ‘apostolic’ by affirming that all those involved in the debate ‘belong to Christ’ and that ‘The way forward needs to be about love, joy and celebration of our common humanity; of our creation in the image of God, of our belonging to Christ - all of us, without exception, without exclusion.’

- They affirmed the importance of the teaching ministry of the Bishops and their need ‘to guard the deposit of faith that we have all inherited’ but went on to describe that the new teaching document would be ‘fully inclusive’ both in subject matter and those who work on it.

STAGE 5: Public Statements from Bishops:

The publication of the Archbishops’ letter appears to have given permission to many bishops to follow a similar line:

Chadwell: “More time does need to be given to a well-founded theology of relationship, friendship and marriage which I hope will lead in time to a full acceptance of same sex marriages in the Church of England.” [10]

Chelmsford: “Therefore, let me be loud and clear on this issue: whether you believe there should be same sex marriage or the blessing of same sex unions or whether you do not, you are still a faithful Anglican. We need to find ways of living with this diversity, not being torn apart by it.” [11]

Hereford: “my own position as one who wants to affirm same sex relationships while seeing marriage itself as being by definition between a man and a woman. In other words, as the Report puts it, “Interpreting the existing framework to permit maximum freedom within it, without changes to the law or the doctrine of the Church.” [12]

Liverpool: “We will not willfully break the law or flout properly agreed guidance. But our exploration of maximum freedom may carry us to places in relation to law and guidance where we have not previously gone. And all this will happen anyway.” [13]

“It’s all very cheerful and happy, as people gather at the back of church, and I’m shaking hands with people and we’re all laughing and talking, and a woman comes up and shakes my hand and says “My daughter is getting married and you won’t marry her in church will you, because her fiancée is a woman”. She’s stating a fact and she’s clearly exasperated because of this fact. And I agree that it’s a fact. So I say “No, I’m afraid we won’t, we can’t under our laws at the moment”, and then I say this: “But we can give her and her partner such a lovely service of welcome and recognition and affirmation”, and the woman smiles and says “Oh, well that’s very good; you mean a service of blessing?”, and I say, “Send me an email and we’ll do what we can”.” [14]

Manchester: “To be purposefully paradoxical is to recognise that whilst consistency may be a feature of the endpoints of a journey it is rarely present all along the way.....In many ways we will be more like the pluriform Church of the New Testament, marvelously malleable under the hand of the Holy Spirit...” [15]

Oxford: “The last few weeks have been a sharp and sometimes painful reminder to me of the wide spread of views across the Diocese on these issues. By the grace of God, I hope we will grow through these experiences, honouring and respecting our differences and seeing our diversity as a gift and, ultimately, a strength.” [16]

Portsmouth: “In a media statement I have committed myself to a church, and so a diocese, which is fully inclusive in its welcome and in which all who wish are affirmed as valued fellow members of the Body of Christ. I shall further be considering how in our diocese we give effect to the bishops’ shared intention to use maximum freedom to offer spiritual, pastoral and liturgical ministry to all people.” [17]

Selby: “Whilst I remain convinced that the institution of marriage within Anglican thought has an intrinsic relationship to responsible reproduction, I do feel that our tradition has the resources to bless other relationships of love, longevity and depth.” [18]

Truro: “I can see a place for those of same-sex attraction in a committed relationship. We ought to find a way, as indeed Issues in Human Sexuality said all those years ago, we ought to find a way of allowing God to carry on doing what God has done right down through history, of blessing and being with people in different situations.” [19]

What now?

Whilst it is true that there have always been heterodox bishops, we need to take on board how much the environment in which we are working has changed:

- The aim is no longer to debate or discover what the ‘truth’ is but instead the aim is to keep us ‘walking together’ despite our differences.
- This may mean that we are given more freedom to flourish; we may be offered curates, church planting opportunities or chances to teach ‘truth’ at diocesan events.
- But there is a cost. Our ‘truth’ is now just one of many acceptable but contradictory ‘truths’ that must be allowed to flourish for the sake of unity.
- It is accepted by the bishops that at times some may have to ‘walk at a distance’ – our communion might be ‘impaired’ – but even this will be celebrated as a testimony to the fact that we are still walking together because our ‘common baptism’ outweighs our profound disagreements. This, of course, completely undermines the idea that these are ‘first order’ or, in the words of the latest report from the Faith and Order Commission, ‘apostolic’ disagreements. [20]
- So, we are left with the question of how, in a church that has undermined the authority of the Scriptures, the 39 Articles and the Canons by accepting the plurality of truth, we are clearly seen and understood to uphold, defend and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, without fear or favour?

Endnotes

- 1) “The Articles of Religion were carefully drafted. Article VI does not say that everything that can be, or is claimed to be, proved from Scripture must be believed as an article of faith, nor does it say that things that cannot be proven from Scripture may not be believed. It leaves room for Anglicans to disagree about aspects of Scripture but makes Scripture the touchstone for the things necessary to salvation.” (Pilling Report – paragraph 286)
- 2) “It follows that, when thinking how to respond to the changes in sexual ethics and practice that have taken place in our society, the Church of England must give highest regard to the teaching of the Scriptures. It further means that it would not be legitimate for the Church of England to require anything in terms of its belief and practice that was obviously contrary to the Scriptures.” (Pilling Report – paragraph 289)
- 3) “Putting Scripture, tradition and reason together in the Anglican way does not imply that each stands in isolation from the others as a way of making ethical judgements. Scripture remains the starting point and the primary source of authority for Christians, but no one reading of Scripture is thereby vindicated.” (Pilling Report – paragraph 301)
- 4) “The [Pilling] Report itself did not attempt to analyse or decide upon all the scriptural arguments. Exploring the role of scripture, in ways which might enable those of differing views to understand each other and the underlying issues better, was recognised to be a task for the whole church, and shared conversations were the mechanism which the report recommended for such a process.” (Grace and Disagreement 1 – p11)
- 5) “The emphasis on scripture is deliberate. By turning to biblical scholars for assistance, and recognising the tensions between them in their work, we are affirming the significance of scripture as a source of Christian ethical reflection.” (Grace and Disagreement 1 – p12)

6) “We recognise that for many holding a conservative view of scripture the underlying issue at stake is that of faithfulness to God’s word and this raises “first order” questions in relation to the heart of the gospel. For others, the imperative to read scripture differently stems from a parallel conviction. It is our present determination to remain together as witnesses to the unity of the Triune God that forces us to try to hear the scriptural, theological and missiological arguments of those with whom we disagree profoundly. We believe that, in some way perhaps hidden from us, they still have something to teach us about the Kingdom of God – already here and still to come.” (GS2055 paragraph 8)

7) “Canon A 5 states that “The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.” These are singled out as particular sources of doctrine, not exclusive ones.” (GS 2055 paragraph 48)

8) “Canon A 5 thus preserves a degree of latitude in how clergy interpret the doctrines of the Church of England. But it is a latitude with boundaries. Where the Canons set out the content of particular doctrines, those canonical provisions define the boundaries in respect of the matters they address.” (GS 2055 paragraph 49)

9) “...while recognising that it is for the bishops to formulate teaching on the doctrines of the Church;” (GS 2055 paragraph 67)

10) Feb 17 - letter to clergy

11)

[http://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/uploads/Presidential%20Address%20%2011%20March%202017\(1\).pdf](http://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/uploads/Presidential%20Address%20%2011%20March%202017(1).pdf)

12) Jan 17 - ad clerum

13) <http://liverpool.anglican.org/index.php?p=2387>

14) <https://viamedia.news/2017/04/12/a-moment-in-the-tangle/>

15) <https://viamedia.news/2017/02/22/being-radical-about-radical-inclusion/>

16) <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/general-synod-ways-forward/>

17) <http://stmarysverstoke.org.uk/2017/02/24/weekly-pew-sheet-for-sunday-26th-february-2017/>

18)

<http://www.anglican.ink/article/bishops-bloody-nose-bishop-selby-urges-coe-move-forwardsame-sex-relations>

19) Donna Birrell Show, Radio Cornwall 9/4/17 – the Bishop went on to say that he agreed with the Bishop of Chelmsford’s views on prayers for same-sex couples.

20)

https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2530546/communion_and_disagreement_faoc_report_gs_misc_1139.pdf