



CNI

News Focus -

REFORM Ireland's Response to Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Same Sex Marriage

A fundamentalist group within the C of I has attacked the recent letter to clergy from C of I bishops. The group states the letter is “a dangerous departure from confessing Anglicanism.”

It accuses the bishops of not recognising the supremacy of scripture and continue, “If Holy Scripture is not our bishops' ultimate authority, then they have departed from the reformed Christian faith of which Anglicanism is a wonderful expression.”

The group then divide the house of bishops almost into sheep and goats, stating, “We are confident that those bishops who are Christian brothers in the House of Bishops fought to retain

certain orthodox sentiments and that this letter is much better than it could have been.”

Reform concludes, “We call on our brothers in the House of Bishops to please restate their own position if it indeed differs from that expressed in their letter... We beg you to lead us in correctly handling of the word of truth, to call Christian people to godly restraint -- to put godly truth over the principle of collegiality or unbiblical unity.”

Text of Reform’s letter -

In the past week every presbyter in the Church of Ireland has received a letter from their bishop entitled "Some Frequently Asked Questions and Responses Concerning Same Sex Marriage". It is a letter agreed in the House of Bishops and each bishop has put their own name to it in their diocese signifying their personal agreement to its contents.

We are concerned because what the letter contains is a dangerous departure from confessing Anglicanism. It is dangerous because of its appearance of orthodoxy while undermining the principles of our reformed protestant denomination. What follows is an unpacking of our understanding of the letter. We include a

copy of the letter itself below with numbered paragraphs.

The letter from our bishops proposes to encourage mutual respect and attentiveness, but it communicates something quite different. It demonstrates two disturbing characteristics of our House of Bishops: (A) they make the Church of Ireland its own primary authority and source of unity and (B) they assume that our church's teaching on the issue of human sexuality is liable, even certain, to change.

A. The Church as its Own Authority

Our bishops make the Church of Ireland's canons, rites, ceremonies and liturgies the primary and ultimate authority for our doctrinal and moral teaching. If this is true, the only barrier to a Church of Ireland minister conducting same-sex marriages is the canons and liturgy of the Church of Ireland. Their letter defends this approach by suggesting this matter is of 'expressly legal function' (¶3). The letter itself cannot sustain this tactic as it later calls us to 'offer service and leadership in the things of God.' (¶15)

Our bishops propose the following arguments against the practice of same sex marriage in the Church of Ireland: the status of the current canons (¶6), the absence of liturgical resources (¶6 & 8), and restraint for the sake of other's consciences (¶14-15). The primary authority of Anglican tradition is notably absent -- the letter neglects Scripture or any appeal to its' authority.

Our bishops' neglect of Scripture departs from the Church of Ireland's stated principles in the preamble & declaration to our constitution and our historic reformed protestant doctrine contained in the BCP, articles, ordinal and homilies. The benefit of these Anglican documents is in their agreement with Scripture. Apart from their agreement with Scripture they have no Christian authority and cease to be identifiably Anglican.

The impediment to our support of, conducting of, or entry into so-called "same-sex marriage" is not our canons, liturgical resources, or others' consciences (cf ¶14), as our bishops propose. Our impediment is the clear and present word of God in Scripture from which our doctrine is derived. If Holy Scripture is not our bishops' ultimate authority, then they have departed from

the reformed Christian faith of which Anglicanism is a wonderful expression.

Rather than a call to canonical conformity and liturgical observance, we long for a call from our House of Bishops to proper Christian restraint that is obedience to our Lord's word. To act without such restraint in this matter is not merely inviting division (§15), it is open rebellion against Christ and a withdrawal from Christian life and doctrine, a wilful sinfulness that Scripture and our scriptural Anglican traditions meet with rebuke and discipline.

The letter calls us to unity (§15 & 17). The unity to which Anglicanism draws us is unity in Christ by his cross expressed in obedience to our Lord's commands. We show ourselves 'charitable', by lovingly calling others to the same loving obedience. Any other unity is a false and non-Christian unity that is strange to Anglican doctrine and practice. One colleague has noted:

"God is mentioned twice. Jesus is never mentioned. The Church of Ireland and/or 'bishops' are mentioned about 15 times! Basically, its call to denominational unity trumps obedience to God's truth."

By neglecting the Scriptures and replacing their authority by canons and liturgy, the root of our reformed Anglican Church is abandoned by its bishops.

B. Assumption of Certain and Imminent Change

The letter assumes that change in our church's teaching on homosexuality is a certainty, being simply a matter of time. It achieves this by a subtle but constant use of otherwise redundant words and phrases that diminish the authority of Christian teaching on human sexuality. We may have been encouraged if the bishops had instructed us to "adhere to the Canons of the Church of Ireland" and "the Church of Ireland practices". Instead they say, "while the Canons of the Church of Ireland stand as they are" and "what the Church of Ireland currently practices" (§6 & 16 -- italics added). The use of 'while' and "currently" modify what was certain and set, making the church's teaching on this matter uncertain and changeable. That the modifiers are all 'temporal markers' amplifies the impression that change to the church's teaching is a foregone and imminent conclusion.

Thus, we receive this letter as an agreed episcopal departure from Holy Scripture as the primary authority that is the basis of our beloved and confessional Anglican tradition. We are instructed to be committed, or at least resigned, to an inevitable parting from orthodox Christian teaching.

We are confident that those bishops who are Christian brothers in the House of Bishops fought to retain certain orthodox sentiments and that this letter is much better than it could have been. What we have received may contain hard-won compromises. It is nonetheless, still a letter that steps away from Christian doctrine and lays out a carpet for further departures.

We call on our brothers in the House of Bishops to please restate their own position if it indeed differs from that expressed in their letter. Follow the lead of Cranmer who repented of his signature. We are aware that the pressure of collegiality is strong and that there are very many in our denomination who would be angered by such bravery. Please remember that the faith we have received and the support we offer as fellow followers of the Lord is far stronger than the power of those who depart from Holy Scripture.

We beg you to lead us in correctly handling of the word of truth, to call Christian people to godly restraint -- to put godly truth over the principle of collegiality or unbiblical unity. This will be costly in this age but we are working for the riches of the Kingdom that is yet to come.