

# CORE DOCTRINE AND ADIAPHORA – WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

by

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In answer to the question put to it by General Synod 2004, the Primate’s Theological Commission (PTC) concluded that “that the blessing of committed same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine,” but “not a matter of what is often referred to as a ‘core’ doctrine, in the sense of being credal doctrine.”

Now, I readily admit that the PTC’s conclusion is not especially profound, and I can understand why some are not pleased with it. After all, it does not clearly satisfy anyone’s prejudices.<sup>i</sup> But before I comment further on the categories of doctrine discussed in the *St. Michael Report* (*SMR*), let me suggest that this should be one reason why the report ought to be commended to the church. While the *SMR* doesn’t develop a theology of sexuality or sexual ethics, it does lay out what we think needs to be talked and prayed about in the hope that the church will be helped to overcome the supercharged rhetoric that divides us.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said at the Primates’ Meeting in February 2005: “People are no longer confident that we are speaking the same language, appealing to the same criteria in our theological debates. And the deep lost-ness and confusion that arises from that and the anger that arises from that is something that does not in any sense help the long-term health of the body or our search for truth together in the Body.”<sup>ii</sup>

It was the hope of many of us on the commission that the *SMR* might furnish insights that were new to some, and suggest a theological vocabulary that could be used to promote deeper discussion and perhaps even healing.

A discussion must begin with terminology that is in use, however. Consequently, the PTC chose to organise its discussion of doctrine with reference to the terms “core doctrine” and “*adiaphora*.” I don’t think that any of us were particularly happy with either term, but we used them because they are the terms used by the *Windsor Report* and we were conscious of the fact that our work would form another stream of that same conversation. Let me say something about each expression.

The phrase “core doctrine” doesn’t have much of a pedigree, really. It comes from the 1996 trial of Bishop Walter Righter in the Episcopal Church in the United States. Charges of heresy brought against Bishop Righter of Newark for ordaining a sexually active homosexual individual were turned down on the grounds that the bishop’s action was not contrary to the “core doctrine” of the Episcopal Church. In this instance, the term was used to apply to what the court called “the apostolic *kerygm*” (a phrase which itself is only about 70 years old and, although scholars debate what it actually means, is generally taken to indicate the earliest proclamation of the gospel, identifying Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah.)

In the *St. Michael Report* “core doctrine” has a broader reference: “The credal and earliest conciliar explications of Scripture with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity and the person and work of Jesus Christ.” (§8) These are the central convictions of the undivided church of the first eight centuries and, of course, any deviation from such fundamental teachings would automatically make a group not only non-Anglican, but non-Christian.

By contrast, the term “*adiaphora*” has a venerable ancestry. Originally devised by ancient Stoic philosophers to describe things that are neither evil nor good, Cicero rendered it “*indifferentia*,” or “matters indifferent.”

We mustn’t understand this in the sense of being unimportant or deserving of an apathetic response. For Classical philosophers, these matters included such things as pain and death. On a more positive note, the word was useful for the Medieval theologians in their discussion of those activities Christians are not duty bound to perform, but that were deemed meritorious (the theological phrase for these is ‘works of supererogation’ – from the Latin meaning “to spend over and above;”; but see Article XIV.)

The term was pressed into service again in 1548 when the Lutheran Church was thrown into controversy over a cluster of ritual, theological and ethical questions that seemed important at the time. Should priests be permitted to marry? Should lay people be given both bread and wine at Holy Communion? Could the Mass be said in Latin (omitting, of course, references to sacrifice and saints)?

What motivated much of this debate was the fear of reverting to Roman Catholicism. The definition settled on by the church was a moderate one – these are *adiaphora*: matters neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s word and not opposed to good doctrine. In the context of the English Reformation the term was understood as referring to those things that Christians could observe or omit for the sake of order in the church, and it applied, in the case of John Hooper (c. 1495-1555), to the question of whether or not he should be required to be consecrated wearing a surplice. The authors of the *Windsor Report* clearly use it in its Reformation sense when they define *adiaphora* as matters “upon which disagreement can be tolerated without endangering unity” (§A.36).

For my part, I do wish that the PTC had done more work on the definition of doctrine and the nature of doctrinal development. Nevertheless, I want to reflect a little bit on where the issue of same-sex blessings fits in this spectrum between core doctrine and *adiaphora*, leaving aside the question of whether or not same-sex blessings are “commanded or forbidden by God’s word.”

There are many beliefs that are rightly understood as “doctrinal” in that they represent the acknowledged teaching of the Anglican Church and are essential to its identity, polity (that is, structure and organisation) and mission.

The *SMR* rightly observes that an issue like same-sex unions, while not itself a matter of core doctrine, carries strong implications for central doctrines such as what it means for human beings to be made in the image of God, salvation and marriage. So it would be a serious misreading of the intent of the report to isolate the category of “core doctrine” and claim that because same-sex unions are not to be categorized as such, they are not important enough to require greater consensus in the Anglican Church’s deliberations.

It may surprise some to learn that, at one time, the existence of bishops in the Church of England was regarded as a “matter indifferent.” The great 16<sup>th</sup> century Anglican divine, Richard Hooker, said that the Scripture does not require episcopal structure and that church government itself is not a matter of salvation (*Laws* III.2.2). Nevertheless, he said that episcopal structure could be biblically defended and that it was integral to the role of the monarchy in England; i.e., without it the church would cease to be Anglican. There are, therefore, “indifferent” doctrines which, if

deviated from, could call into question our church's identity as an *Anglican* church within the definitions of its own formularies.<sup>iii</sup>

Thus, it would seem to me that we all adhere to a notion that there is a "hierarchy of doctrine," that there are some doctrines that are more fundamental to our identity as Christians and as Anglicans than others. Lacking a confessional basis, we are not sure what to call these doctrines (perhaps they will be articulated as "covenantal doctrines" if the proposal of the *Windsor Report* is ever developed.) In any event, the model of concentric circles as described on the church's website is unhelpful. The status of doctrine is contingent not only on its relationship to "core doctrine," but also on historical and circumstantial factors that relate to the church's identity, order and mission.

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<sup>i</sup> For my commentary on the PTC's work, see my report to the Anglican Consultative Council at <http://www.anglican.ca/about/accp/andrews.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons\\_speeches/2005/050217.htm](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/2005/050217.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> A lucid discussion of this and the broader theme of *adiaphora* can be found in Stephen Sykes's article, 'The Fundamentals of Christianity' in the book he edited with John Booty, *The Study of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 231-45.