

John Thorp

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“The St Michael Report: Wrong Question, Wrong Answer”

Abstract

The first part of this paper argues that the *St Michael Report* has introduced innovations in the church's understanding of what is meant by 'doctrine' that are likely to lead to general confusion and paralysis, and that are certainly not going to be helpful in reaching a decision about the blessing of same sex relationships. The *Report* artificially broadens the meaning of the term 'doctrine' so that it includes (incredibly) even *adiaphora*, matters of indifference: we will be a church that counts indifferent matters among its doctrines! The upshot is that blessing same sex unions is a matter of doctrine for the reason that, basically, everything is. This unfortunate answer has come about because, essentially, the Synod put the wrong question to the Commission – at least it was the wrong question if the Synod's intention was to seek an acceptable resolution of the debate about same sex blessings, and to seek that resolution in a timely fashion. In its second part the paper attempts to sketch a more classically Anglican resolution of the issue.

Dr. John Thorp is a member and former Chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of Western Ontario, and a member of the Graduate Faculty of Theology at Huron University College. His principal research interests are in ancient philosophy and in philosophical theology.

Your Grace, my Lord Bishop, friends,

Forgive my rather punchy title, but I really do want to sound the alarm over the drift of thought that is represented by the *St Michael Report*. I think it would lead us, on the theoretical level, into an impossible quagmire in which we would be abandoning one of the chief historical strengths of Anglicanism – indeed, part of its real genius –; and on the practical level it would exacerbate the tensions that have arisen about same sex relationships and make schism inevitable. In this talk I want to outline those dangers in the clearest and most dramatic terms that I can, hoping that the church will take a closer look and draw back from what is looking like a rather reckless and supine acceptance of the *Report*. And, in the final part of my talk I want to suggest a way in which we might find a more classically Anglican solution to our dissension about blessing same sex relationships.

Let me be clear, of course, that in these critical remarks, I mean no disrespect to the Primate's Theological Commission. Indeed, there is much in the *St Michael Report* that is perspicacious, thoughtful and useful. But I think that in one of those blind accidents of history, in the heat of the moment on the floor of General Synod, the wrong question was put to the Commission, and that is what has led to these troubles and dangers. I'll explain this in due course.

A. Problems at the theoretical level

Let me begin, then, with the theoretical problems.

However exactly we understand the meaning of the word 'doctrine', it has a connotation of stability and centrality. In catholic theology there is a traditional distinction between doctrine and discipline: doctrine is the unchangeable (or barely changeable) core teaching of the church, and discipline is that set of rules and regulations that seek to embody and express doctrine, though the rules and regulations, the practices, are changeable. Thus it might be thought a matter of doctrine in moral theology that restraint in the pleasures of the body is to be practised; but the particular rules of fasting or abstinence, the lenten observances and those on ember days, etc., are all matters of discipline: they may vary over times and places. The high holiness of the sacrament of the Lord's table is a matter of doctrine, but the question whether that holiness is to be marked by infrequency of celebration is a question of discipline, as also is the question whether children should be permitted to receive the sacrament. The need for penitence and confession of sin is a matter of doctrine, but whether confession should be auricular and private, or public and general, is a matter of discipline. That greed is sinful is a matter of doctrine, but whether charging interest on a loan – usury – is a case of greed is a matter of discipline. The sacrament of marriage is a matter of doctrine, but the permitted degrees of consanguinity are a matter of discipline. And so forth.

The distinction is a good one, I think, because it keeps us focused on the central tenets of the faith: it gives us a sense of proportion. We do not want to be a church where 'anything goes', and neither do we want to be locked in a straight-jacket of unalterable practice. We do

not want to be reinventing theology every Sunday in every pulpit; neither do we want to be thrown into paroxysms of doubt about the validity of our sacraments if we make changes in the church calendar.

Now Anglicans have traditionally been slender on doctrine, at least as compared with Roman and Orthodox Catholics as well as with many Protestant sects. Our doctrinal instruments are few and mostly historical: we adhere, basically, to the Lambeth Quadrilateral, and through it to the scriptures, the creeds, the dominical sacraments and the historical episcopacy. Letters from the primate do not have the doctrinal force of papal encyclicals; resolutions of the Lambeth Conference are advisory only; they are not like conciliar decrees of the early, the universal, church. There is wisdom, I think, in this tradition of doctrinal slenderness. If you try to define too much detail you're bound to fall into error: an early error in navigation can land you on the wrong continent. I think this is what has happened, for example, to the Roman Catholics over the question of condoms. Pope Paul VI laid down catholic doctrine about contraception in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, and as a result the RC church has landed in the moral absurdity of forbidding the use of condoms even to married couples one member of which is HIV+. They've landed on the wrong continent, and they have done so because they tried to define too much, to extend doctrinal definition into small details.

Now it is against that background of the doctrinal slenderness of Anglicanism that I see huge danger in the *St Michael Report*. The Commission was asked to say whether the blessing of same sex unions is a matter of doctrine; it concluded that, yes, blessing same sex unions is a matter of doctrine, but it did so on the basis of a radical revision in the understanding of doctrine. Rather than being a rather narrow collection of central tenets of the faith, doctrine is now understood to be a very broad range of items, running from core or credal matters like the trinity, all the way to *adiaphora*, matters of indifference. The absurdity of this radical revision is shown in the paradox of the idea of doctrinal *adiaphora*. How can there be matters of indifference that are nonetheless doctrines? Presumably the idea of the bodily assumption of the BVM is a matter of indifference for Anglicans: you can believe it or not; but, under the revisionary definition of doctrine in the *St Michael Report* that will be a matter of doctrine. And the church will be saying: it's doctrinal, but you can believe it or not as you please. Or

perhaps the church will be saying: we have this whole big long list of doctrines, but you only have to believe a few of them. To my ear this is an abuse of language.

With this radical redefinition of doctrine the Commission has really opened the floodgates: just about everything will be a matter of doctrine. So it's no wonder that the Commission concluded that blessing same sex unions is a matter of doctrine – virtually everything is a matter of doctrine, so, of course –*a fortiori* – the blessing of same sex unions is.

To my mind, what the Commission has really shown is not that the question about blessing same sex unions is a question of doctrine; rather it has shown that it is a theological question.

Although the *Report* does not give us a definition of doctrine, we are able to follow the reasoning that led to the conclusion that blessing same sex unions is a doctrinal matter. It is, essentially, that the question is integrally linked to the following theological themes: salvation, incarnation, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, theological anthropology, sanctification, and holy matrimony. But of course nearly everything that we discuss in our councils and synods is linked to theological themes – at least, we always try to address our questions in a godly way, in a way that is responsible to the traditions and teachings of the church. Think of all the things that will now be doctrinal matters under this revisionary understanding of doctrine. Our deliberations over the residential schools crisis invoked themes of human dignity – that is, of seeing the *imago dei* in all human beings – of incarnation, of reconciliation and repentance and hence of salvation, of the evolution of human understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so forth. So those deliberations and decisions were doctrinal. Our discussion about full communion with the Lutherans was hugely doctrinal in its references (and we cleverly got round the fourth doctrine of the Lambeth Quadrilateral on that one – the historical episcopacy). Even questions regarding clergy pensions are doctrinal in that they involve central theological themes: providence, the authority of the biblical injunction to take no thought for the morrow, justice, usury, the ethics of investment. There may be a few subjects discussed in our synods that are not doctrinal in this new, very loose, sense, but they are not many. It is what it is to be a church: to take our decisions in the light of our theology.

My anglican reserve, my anglican conservatism, quails at this proposed broadening, this loosening, of our understanding of doctrine in the way that is proposed by the *St Michael Report*. By that understanding, literally everything will be a doctrine, and if everything is a doctrine then, in a sense, nothing is. Please, please, please: let us keep our doctrinal slenderness.

I think that part of the problem with the PTC's report is that the Commission did not conceive the question of doctrine against any alternatives. That is, they were not asking: is this doctrine or is it discipline? Is this doctrine or simply pastoral practice? Is this doctrine or is it inculturation? The lack of presence of such alternatives in the *Report*, such foils against which to understand the idea of doctrine, has led to the bizarre conclusion that, essentially, everything is doctrine. Nothing else is ever in play. We musn't go there: please, please, please, let us keep our doctrinal slenderness.

B. Problems at the practical level

I've outlined my theoretical worries about the breathtaking broadening of the category of doctrine that is implied in the *St Michael Report*. There are churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, that go for defining doctrines in great detail, but that is just not our tradition. But I have some practical worries as well, essentially three of them.

1) The first is that the *Report* seems to envision that the way to clear up the matter of blessing same sex unions is to have a great big conversation – respectful, with careful listening – of how the themes of salvation, incarnation, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, theological anthropology, sanctification, and holy matrimony mesh with the question of blessing same sex unions. Can you imagine what such a conversation would look like? How could we ever achieve a single consensus on such a big subject? or, rather, on this massive series of subjects? We've seen enough of the homosexuality debate that we know that very frequently people's theology is driven by their views about homosexuality, rather than the other way around. (I'm convinced that most people develop views about how to read the bible based

on their views of homosexuality, rather than vice versa.) The proposed vast doctrinal consensus is surely a hopeless enterprise, a will o' the wisp. We're never going to settle *all that* in a clear and definitive way. Nor, as Anglicans, should we want to.

2) A second practical problem is even more troubling. Suppose that General Synod decides that blessing same sex unions is a doctrinal matter, that it deserves a canon, and that it should therefore be decided by the slow process. Suppose we go through the slow process and, in the end, the blessing of same sex unions is approved. There is then no room for local options: it will be a doctrine of the church that same sex unions can be a means of grace and a recognized form of Christian life; blessings will then have to be offered: they'll have to be offered not only in New Westminster and Niagara, but also in Algoma and Eastern Newfoundland. Well, that is not quite true, since in the polity of the Canadian church the diocesan bishop, the ordinary, is the final authority on what rites shall or shall not be performed in his or her diocese; but imagine the position of a conservative bishop if the church decided that, as a matter of doctrine, the blessing of same sex unions is approved. Such a bishop, withholding permission for same sex blessings, would be within his or her rights no doubt, but would be in violation of a doctrine of the church! It would be a wilful withholding of a means of grace from some of his or her flock. It's an intolerable position that would likely lead to huge unrest and schism. And the result will be the same if it turns out that, by doctrine, the church does not allow the blessing of same sex unions. Doctrines can't be local options! The recommendations of the *St Michael Report* are, in my view, a sure and certain path to schism.

3) Perhaps most troubling of all is the following reflection. To decide that this divisive matter is a matter of doctrine is to turn up the heat and draw wide attention of the world to the matter. Surely it would be a more sober and patient and peace-seeking thing to try to turn down the heat, to make the matter less a focus of attention: make the matter one of practice rather than of doctrine, or make it local rather than Provincial. If our decision, whatever it is, is doctrinal, then it assumes great importance and inflames the Anglican world even more. And if we try to put out the fires by saying that we Canadian Anglicans mean something different by the word 'doctrine' than do other English speakers, just who will

listen to that footnote? It would be better to find a way of dealing with the question that is cooler, less dramatic.

C. The Question that Should Have Been Asked

I suppose that the person who, at the last General Synod, raised the question whether the blessing of same sex unions is a matter of doctrine had in mind the commonly shared notion that matters of doctrine have to be decided by what I might call the "slow process": passage by two successive General Synods with 2/3 majorities in all three houses. Perhaps this was a move to postpone and slow down a decision on the presenting issue. But if that was the ambition of the person who raised the question, then he or she was asking both too much and too little.

What I mean is this. A question does not have to be doctrinal to require the slow process. It can be a matter of doctrine, of worship or of discipline – but it ALSO has to be a canonical matter, that is a matter which is addressed or which ought to be addressed, in a canon. Now as I have argued at length, the blessing of same sex unions should not be seen as a matter of doctrine, in any interesting or useful sense of that word; but *for sure* it is a matter of worship – since a new rite would need to be devised – and for sure, I would say, it is a matter of discipline, in the theological sense of that word. The question that hasn't been answered, because it wasn't asked, is whether the blessing of same sex unions is a matter for a canon.

Now the canons of the Anglican church of Canada are a very bizarre document, bizarre because of what is covered by them and what is not. For example, if one thing is defining of the Anglican tradition it is that we recognize two dominical sacraments: baptism and the Lord's supper; the other sacraments are, in the words of the 39 Articles, "so-called" sacraments. Well, we have no canon on baptism and no canon on the eucharist. Indeed, the only sacrament on which we have a canon is holy matrimony, and it is the longest of the canons! The reason that we did not have to go through the slow process to approve the priesting of women is that there is no canon on Holy Orders. So, to trigger the requirement that same sex blessing be approved by the slow process you don't have to go to the length of establishing that it is a matter of doctrine – worship or discipline will do; but you must also

show that it is properly a canonical matter. The PTC was not asked to address this matter, and it is too bad that it was not, for it is crucial to the case.

If, as I suspect, the motive was to slow the process, then there was no need to ask if this is a matter of doctrine – worship or discipline will do – but there was a need to ask if this is a canonical matter. And that question wasn't put. I regret this, because it seems to me that this wrong question has sent the PTC off on a kind of red herring, from which they have returned with a radically revised and flabby understanding of 'doctrine', a revision that would make us into the sort of church we have never been, and that we, surely, do not want to be.

D. An Anglican approach

And so I come to my suggestion for a more classically Anglican approach to this problem.

The preliminary thing we need to do is to adjust our attitudes. This is a deep quarrel, involving deep convictions. Perhaps we should just split up in the friendliest way possible, as the Rev Mr. Maitland will be suggesting. But if we want not to split, then we need to accept three things:

- 1) a credible case has been made on both sides of the question: neither side is sheer lunacy; moreover these two contrary views are held by persons of good faith, in good faith;
- 2) we should exercise the fine anglican virtue of epistemological humility: we should draw back from being cocksure about our own position;
- 3) we should accept the fact that in any imaginable resolution of the conflict neither side will get everything it wants; if we persist in the view that it is "my way or the highway", then it can only be the highway.

If we can stand back and make that change in attitude then the first thing I think should happen is that the General Synod formally receive the *St Michael Report*, with thanks, but not approve it. We need to retreat from such inflation of the idea of doctrine that contradicts the whole genius of Anglicanism, that will lead to certain schism, and that will inflame the already raging controversy throughout the Communion.

Secondly, I think the pending motion to approve the blessing of same sex unions as a local diocesan option should be withdrawn. The reason for this is that, although that motion was well designed when it was designed, the changes in Canadian civil law that have occurred since it was designed make it otiose. It seems to me that we should change the discussion to one about blessing same sex civil *marriages*. (Why would we bless same sex unions that are not civil marriages unless we are willing also to bless heterosexual unions that are not civil marriages? Perhaps we should be willing to do that – to bless betrothals – but it is another subject altogether.) And if we change the subject from blessing unions to blessing marriages, then I think we have a perfect, elegant, deflationary way out of the impasse. It stands upon the gift of Messrs Chretien and Martin, recently confirmed by Mr Harper: but we should seize opportunity where it presents itself. Let me explain.

It seems to be the case that the real rock of offence in this whole debate around the Anglican world lies in the creation of new liturgies. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* goes the saying: if we introduce a new liturgy we introduce a new belief. That is why the blessing liturgies of New Westminster and TEC's approval of the development of blessing liturgies in various dioceses stuck so much in various Anglican craws around the world. Making new liturgies creates anxieties. But we in Canada now have the good fortune that we can bless same sex marriages without introducing a new liturgy: we already have a rite. It is the rite called the "Blessing of a Civil Marriage", in the *Book of Occasional Celebrations*, published by General Synod in 1992. (Let me be clear: this is not a rite for celebrating or solemnizing a marriage; it is a rite for blessing a marriage that has already been solemnized by the state.) Admittedly one would have to change some pronouns to use it for a homosexual couple, but we are always changing pronouns in our service books anyway. Here is one of the two alternative prayers of blessing in that rite; it seems to me perfectly applicable to a same sex couple, indeed just what one would wish for them:

O God, you have so consecrated the covenant of marriage that in it is represented the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church. Send therefore your blessing upon these your servants, that they may so love, honour, and cherish each other in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

It's not clear to me that we would even need a motion at General Synod to extend the use of this rite to same sex couples. We would have to ignore one of its rubrics, which says that only those civil marriages can be blessed that the church would be willing to solemnize. But I'm not sure that the rubrics for occasional celebrations are heavy with authority. We could just operate with the normal pastoral discretion as to which civil marriages should or should not be blessed. Perhaps a permissive motion at the Synod should be contemplated, but, please, not a doctrinal one! The matter could be left to diocesan or even just parochial option.

And I should mention that, even if such a change in rubric were to be made by the Synod, it does not seem to me that it would be a matter of a canon. The reason is that, although we have a lengthy canon on marriage, there is no mention in it of the blessing of a civil marriage. The blessing of civil marriages is, in our polity, extra-canonical.

Now for the conscience clause. I am sure that those who are conservative on this matter would find it difficult to accept this resolution of the impasse: it would seem that the essence of their case is lost: homosexual relationships would, after all, be being blessed in some parts of the church. Note that the church would not be solemnizing these marriages, only blessing them. Not a sacrament, but a sacramental. But I accept that that might still be hard to swallow.

It might be, but perhaps it should not be. You know, the Primate's Theological Commission, in its haste, only did half the job that was assigned to it. It was asked to consider the blessing of same sex unions. It considered the status of same sex unions at length, but had almost nothing to say about *blessing*. And yet blessing is a word with many different strands of meaning. Do we really know what we are doing when we bless something? (I am tremendously pleased that the Rev Mr Fletcher's talk last evening raised this question, and provided some very striking answers to it. It seems to me that that is exactly where, theologically, we need to go.) As Mr Fletcher showed, the meanings run from making something holy – as when we bless altar linens or monstrances (I wish!) – to simply commending something "Bless this food to our use", to wishing someone or something well,

as when we bless animals on St Francis' Day. Then let us invoke the third strand in the genius of Anglicanism, ambiguity – the great wisdom of the Elizabethan settlement on which we are established. Let us hide our disagreement over same sex unions under the ambiguity of the word "blessing". Just as we all say the same words at our eucharistic liturgies but are free to understand them in a variety of ways, so we can use the word "blessing" as applied to same sex marriages, but understand the word differently. And surely no one can balk at wishing a same sex couple well in their relationship. Surely, even the most conservative among us would not approach a same sex couple and say "I hope your relationship doesn't last and you both go back to being lonely and miserable"; that would simply be churlish, and if there is one thing that Anglicans, classically, are not, it is churls.

Think about this plan. It gives conservatives something: there is no doctrinal approval of homosexual unions; there is no celebration – no solemnization -- of same sex marriages; there doesn't even need to be any very heavy idea of blessing in people's heads as the blessing service is conducted. On the other hand conservatives would have to put up with the church's apparent ceasing to condemn homosexual intimacies.

It gives liberals church blessings of same sex marriages (and they can understand the word 'blessing' in a rich way); on the other hand it falls far short of the liberal ambition to have fully equal treatment for homosexual and heterosexual couples: it denies them the service of celebration or solemnization of marriage; it also denies liberals the joy of a ringing declaration from the national church. (I am a liberal and I would like that; but I'd be willing to forgo it in the interests of keeping us together around the Lord's table.)

It gives the General Synod a way to avoid making a big splashy decision one way or the other, and the inevitable alienation of large groups, whether conservative or liberal. It also gives the General Synod a way to avoid further delay on the matter, which, in my view, would essentially make the Synod irrelevant. And it gives the shelter of ambiguity to our interaction with the rest of the Communion.

E. Concluding Observations

I have spoken, at various moments, of the genius of Anglicanism, and I have identified three strands in that genius. Let me recall them. First, there is the genius of doctrinal slenderness; this should make us recoil before the recommendation of the *St Michael Report* that so small a matter as blessing same sex unions should be taken to be a matter of doctrine. If we go with the *Report* then everything will be doctrine, and our Anglican genius will be hopelessly compromised. Secondly, there is the virtue of epistemological humility, the recognition that unwavering certainty is out of place when considering subsidiary matters in the panoply of theological opinions: we freely allow that we don't know what to think about the bodily assumption of the BVM or about whether the rapture will come before or after the tribulations. And thirdly, there is the genius of ambiguity, the realization that we can be bound together by the *symbolon* of words, even if our understanding of those words may – within limits of course – differ from person to person and from time to time. In the case of blessing same sex civil marriages, the words are already there; all we have to do is add a further understanding to them. And that, I think, can be done without fanfare.

Let me add a word of defence of this trinity of anglican virtues. They could appear to be a sort of cowardly shrinking from difficult matters, difficult decisions. Actually, though, – and here I recognize that I speak as a philosopher surrounded by theologians and so have a rather different perspective on these matters – I think that this trio of virtues, virtues of epistemological modesty, are exactly appropriate to their subject matter. It often seems to me that religion is that sphere of human endeavour in which people's subjective certainty about various propositions most outstrips the objective certainty of those propositions. In fact it is both mysterious and outrageous how completely certain people become about their religious views. And so we have a world full of contradictory religious certainties shouting at one another, and, before long, getting out the Kalashnikovs. But if there is any subject on which subjective certainty is out of place it is surely the details of our interaction with the divine, the details of our approach to the transcendent. Surely it is wisdom to be diffident about religious propositions: it is an acknowledgement of our human ignorance in the face of the ineffable mysteries of God.

I dearly hope that we shall survive this quarrel by resorting to our tradition of tolerance, to the possibility of unity *in* diversity. I hope so not just because I love the Anglican church

and its unique style of spirituality, not just because I have personally found it to be at once a comfortable and a bracing spiritual home for the last four decades, but I want to suggest something else as well. I think the Anglican version of religious adherence can be a much needed beacon for the world: a tremendously deep and rich, catholic, scholarly tradition from which to take sustenance, but one that is intinct with a spirit of moderation.

Let me conclude by recalling an important moment in Christian history, a moment that we should hold before ourselves in our strife. In about the year 150 Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, made a trip to Rome to visit Pope Anicetus. They spent many days together discussing the issue that provoked the visit: the date of the celebration of Easter. Should it be set as the third day after the Jewish Passover, 14th Nisan, whatever day of the week that date might fall on? This was the Syrian custom, and they held passionately to it. Or should it always be celebrated on the first day of the week, which we call Sunday, as was the Roman custom? Is it crucial to keep the date or to keep the day? Nowadays, of course, it amazes us that so much angst and anger should have been spent on this subject; but we don't need to know much church history to know how hugely important and divisive such matters of calendar have been at various times. At any rate, Polycarp and Anicetus debated this for days, and neither was able to convince the other. Realizing the impossibility of resolving the difference, they agreed to differ *in charity*, and Anicetus invited Polycarp to celebrate the eucharist with him in the papal chapel. Moreover it was agreed that Syria would continue with its calendar tradition, and Rome with its tradition. It is a shining example, from the earliest decades, of differing *in charity*. I pray that we may take their example to heart.