

# DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

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CAN THE BLESSING or marriage of same-sex partnerships be coherently understood as a faithful and Spirit-led development of doctrine in coherence within the terms of the Solemn Declaration?

- a. Re. the institution of marriage in the Prayer Book tradition: It may well be that marriage was originally a social institution into which Christians entered, but it is clear that this institution has at least been “theologised” in the sense that certain Christian values and expectations have been laid upon the institution. In whatever way Christian marriage is reconceived these values and expectations ought to be maintained. In part these include:
  - a recognition that the partners already bear a relationship as siblings in the family of God
  - a recognition that marriage is an instrument of sanctification
  - a recognition that marriage is the only proper context for sexual union
  - a recognition that one of the purposes of marriage is to produce offspring
  - a recognition that marriage is intended to provide companionship
- b. Given the priority placed on the Scriptural witness, and what I perceive to be the biblical perspective on the matter of the proper expression of human sexuality, the answer would have to be “no.” I believe that there are two general requirements that must be met: it must be endorsed or at least permitted by the Bible when read “plainly;” and it must be endorsed or at least permitted by the Catholic Church in some ecumenical manifestation. I recognize that both of these criteria are complex and interrelated.
- c. By requiring the “plain reading” of Scripture, I am aware that it is ultimately the Catholic Christian community that decides what this is. What may at one time have been considered a “plain” reading can to us seem arbitrary or bizarre and is no longer regarded as a coherent way of approaching the Bible (here I am thinking of some of the more notorious examples of allegorical readings of the Bible). Nevertheless, I believe that there are more general rules for reading the Bible that have been operative for the Church in all times and in all places.<sup>1</sup> Inter-

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1. Augustine’s allegorism, for instance, is not unprincipled; firstly because any of the various meanings produced by allegorical interpretation must be harmonious with the teaching of the rest of Scripture and, secondly, because all Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit who, he says, must have known that these various meanings would occur to the readers of Scripture (*De doctrina* 3.27.38). Moreover, a proper reading is contingent on the predisposition of the reader: “In this every student of the Divine Scriptures must exercise himself, having found nothing else in them except [. . .] that God is to be loved for Himself, and his neighbour for the sake of God.” (2.7.10) Alan Richardson writes: “The doctors of the Church were well aware of the dangers of subjectivism, and they insisted that all allegorical interpretations of any given passage of Holy Scripture must be controlled by the Church’s understanding of the teaching of the Bible as a whole.” (*Christian Apologetics* (SCM : London, 1947), p. 181.

preters have always attempted to discern authorial intent; both human (*sensus literalis*) and divine (*sensus plenior*); have valued linguistic or verbal analysis; and have paid credit to the notion that scripture *sui ipsius interpres* (a principle formulated by the Reformers, but evident in practice in all interpretative traditions where the Scriptures are approached as a canonical whole).<sup>2</sup>

- d. By requiring the consent, explicitly or implicitly, of the Catholic Church I am conscious of the way that the interpretation of particular doctrines, particular passages of Scripture, and biblical theology as a whole, has evolved over the past two millennia. There is a kind of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (reception history) which, I believe, is contiguous with the trajectory of God's progressive revelation evident in the Bible itself and which reveals the work of the Spirit in the Church. The difficulty comes in recognizing Catholic consent if it happens in a non-conciliar fashion. Anglican experience would indicate that Spirit-led movements do not require a democratic process to validate them (see Article XXI, Articles of Religion, (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1962, Canada), p 698).
- e. Now to the matter of the blessing of same-sex unions: I confess that I am not prepared at this point to receive this innovation as a legitimate development of doctrine. For reasons I am explaining in a paper entitled "Is there a Natural Reading of Romans 1.24-27?," I do not find any of the proposed readings of Romans 1 that would permit or endorse contemporary expressions of same-sex sexual behaviour to be sufficiently plain. My perception is that the anatomical complementarity of the genders and the explicit procreational purpose of sexual congress in the creation narrative are at the root of the apostolic proscriptions and are compelling reasons for the Church to maintain the tradition of heterosexual union. Moreover, I do not believe that the church in any denominational expression, at least, should feel the liberty to embrace this innovation without a broader acceptance in the Church universal. This is unlikely to come about without a more persuasive biblical and theological case being made.<sup>3</sup>

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2. See *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the "Plain Sense" of Genesis 1-3*, by K. E. Greene-McCreight (Issues in Systematic Theology, vol. 5. New York and Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999).

3. For instance, I am mindful of the challenge of Kathryn Greene-McCreight: we must first be persuaded "that genital gratification is indeed such a fundamental part of our identity that to deny it would be to diminish our humanity" (in *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids/Cambridge : Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 253-4.