

Gospel, Church and Marriage: Preserving Apostolic Faith and Life

What is *Gospel, Church and Marriage: Preserving Apostolic Faith and Life*?

[Gospel, Church and Marriage: Preserving Apostolic Faith and Life](#) is a short (6 page) reflection issued in January 2018 by the [Church of England Evangelical Council \(CEEC\)](#), a “network of networks, bringing evangelicals in the Church of England together for the sake of the gospel”. It was drafted by a group of evangelical theologians and subsequently revised in the light of feedback from a wide range of leaders across evangelical Anglicanism.

What is it trying to do?

At its heart is a desire to articulate a vision of what it means to be an apostolic church faithful to the apostolic gospel of grace and to describe the implications of this for our debates over marriage. It

- seeks to set disagreements about marriage and sexuality “within a wider and deeper theological vision...of human flourishing which is faithful to Scripture” and in particular to re-centre us on the gospel of God’s grace at the heart of the church’s faith, life and mission.
- hopes to “provide clarity in a time of confusion, encourage and bring together those who share its vision, and enable those with a different vision to understand the nature and depth of our concerns and disagreement”.
- aims to help those who agree with it and those who disagree with it “to consider together the implications of our differences for our life together”.

How is it structured?

An **introduction** summarises this wider and deeper theological and biblical vision of God graciously working out his purposes in history through his people “for human flourishing and the good of all”. There follow **three sections** which provide the theological heart of the reflection, rooting it in apostolic teaching. These focus first on the *gospel* (“Apostolic Insistence on the Gospel’s Purpose”) and then on the *church* (“Apostolic Commitment to the Church’s Integrity”) before turning finally to matters of current disagreement in relation to *marriage* (“Apostolic Teaching about Marriage and Singleness”). On the basis of these three sections an **application** (“Preserving Apostolic Faith and Life Today”) offers five conclusions “as to the necessary shape of apostolic faith and life today and what that means for our way forward as Anglicans within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”.

Why is it structured this way?

This ordering of the material arises from the reflection’s desire to locate contentious areas in a wider vision and thereby show their evangelical weight and ecclesial significance. It is hoped that this will be helpful in at least two significant ways:

1. Enabling discovery, in the initial sections, of considerable common ground or, alternatively, uncovering the extent to which differences over marriage are also tied to differences over apostolic teaching concerning the gospel and its purpose and the church and its integrity.
2. Demonstrating why, given apostolic teaching on gospel and church, our disagreements over marriage are so theologically significant and inevitably threaten “that unity in truth and love we have in Christ especially through confession of the apostolic faith”.

This structure also allows the five more practical conclusions to be evaluated in the light of these three sections taken as a whole. Those who reject any of those conclusions are being invited to show why they do not follow theo-logically from the premises of the earlier accounts of gospel,

church and marriage or to show how those accounts are erroneous or incomplete as summaries of apostolic teaching and practice.

What does it say about the gospel?

The central concern here is to highlight that the apostolic gospel proclaiming the work of God's gracious rescue of us in Christ from sin "had the goal and purpose—as well as the power—to transform people's lives into the likeness of Christ". As a result, "in establishing Christian communities the apostles therefore did not teach doctrine without discipleship, faith without formation, or grace without godliness" and their teaching "embraced all areas of human life including sexual conduct". In other words, *ethics* (how we live) and *ecclesiology* (our shared identity, calling and practices as God's people) are matters intrinsically related to the *evangel*, the apostolic gospel itself.

What does it say about the church?

The central concern here is apostolicity and, given the gospel's purpose, the fact that "the apostles could not compromise the holiness of the Church". This is seen in the fact that "for the Church to witness to the gospel with integrity and to embody the gospel's purpose, the apostles had to guard the Church's distinctive boundaries on matters of both doctrine and ethics, including sexual morality". In being an apostolic church, bishops in particular are called to enable the church - in "its ministry of stewarding God's grace to offer it to the world" and building "communities of grace" - to "follow the apostles' example" in every age and ensure that its "teaching and discipline must remain centred on Christ and within the boundaries of essential apostolic teaching".

What does it say about marriage?

The central concern here is to summarise the teaching of the Bible as the revelation of grace in relation to the doctrine of creation ("God made humanity in His image and likeness—embodied as male and female") and, through a strong Christocentric focus, "the gifts of marriage and singleness". The Church of England's teaching on marriage, authorised by Jesus himself, is summarised. Jesus' lived example of singleness is highlighted alongside the apostolic vision of this gift. Sex is also "a gracious gift ordained by our Creator", one "tied to His gift of marriage" and so "the apostles taught that any sex outside marriage has the character of sin". The ethical implications of this apostolic teaching for various areas of contention in the church are not directly addressed while its possible pastoral outworkings are signalled by noting that Jesus' "reputation as a 'friend of sinners' was never won at the cost of watering down such ethical teachings or advocating 'cheap grace'" and that he "held together grace and truth (John 1:14) in His teaching and pastoral practice — a model which the Church should always aim to follow".

What practical applications follow?

First, "the radical inclusivity of the gospel" requires the church to "welcome, and offer God's saving grace to, everyone". To be this community of grace the Church itself "needs forgiveness and transformation" and thus we have to "repent of our many failures in this area" and recommit to apostolic teaching.

Second, although some Christians no longer accept the account of apostolic teaching on marriage offered, "because it is an integral part of our calling to be holy, we cannot treat this teaching as an 'optional extra' (or *adiaphora*)". It is "of a higher order than other divisive matters, often viewed as 'secondary'" *Why?* Because "it calls for faithful obedience to the unambiguous and authoritative teaching of Scripture concerning godly living and human flourishing".

Third, the church, “being defined by adherence to essential apostolic truth should not accept teaching or affirm behaviour—whether implicitly or explicitly—which contradicts or undermines the boundaries laid down by apostolic teaching and practice”. *What might such a false step involve?* One example is clearly stated: “any changes in our liturgy or canons which seek to express, authorise or commend a divergence from these distinctive boundaries would be seen as a departure from the apostolic faith”

Fourth, highlighting evidence already among Anglicans and warning of future ecumenical consequences, it explains that “significant departure from apostolic teaching regrettably requires in response some degree of visible differentiation”.

Finally, the reflection’s application ends with a positive vision that “submission to apostolic teaching and practice means that, as apostolic Anglicans, we are deeply committed to being members of Church of England provinces which are similarly submissive”. Commitments are therefore made to pray and work for that outcome.

What does “visible differentiation” mean?

“Visible differentiation” is a key phrase in the application but one easily misunderstood and misrepresented.

What does it mean? The reflection is clear that “the potential forms and extent of such differentiation are varied”. It does not spell these out although CEEC’s earlier and lengthier [Guarding the Deposit: Apostolic Truth for an Apostolic Church](#), issued in 2017, explored some of the range of these possible forms. All but one of those involved visible differentiation while remaining within the Church of England (e.g. a society, alternative episcopal oversight, a third province), though most forms would require its legal structures to change to some degree to incorporate differentiation.

Is this not an attack on unity? No – it is stressed that any form of visible differentiation must “never lose sight of the goal of restored unity in apostolic truth”. Differentiation is not to be wished for but it “may become a tragic necessity”.

Why may it become a tragic necessity and what is its justification? Such differentiation is described as being a “necessary component of biblical faithfulness” which can arise in order “to ensure the continued preservation of a cohesive ‘apostolic’ community, clearly defined and publicly distinguished by apostolic truth and thus able to offer a faithful and coherent witness to a confused and needy world”. It is therefore only justified when it is a proportionate response by “those who wish to follow the apostles’ practice” in the face of “significant departure from apostolic teaching”. It is that departure by others which “regrettably requires in response some degree of visible differentiation, in order formally to acknowledge and mark this distance”. The sad reality that visible differentiation expresses is that “moving away from ‘apostolic’ and ‘catholic’ teaching concerning what it means to be ‘holy’ will tragically mean we are less visibly ‘one’”.