

## The Archbishop of Canterbury, PLF, Truth and Trust

The full interview of Archbishop Justin by Alastair Campbell and Rory Stewart for their *The Rest is Politics: Leading* podcast [was released on Monday](#). It is well worth listening to, covering a range of areas beginning with his personal story and faith before turning to questions relating to politics and then issues in the life of the church. In relation to the latter, there is [the Archbishop's answer on "gay sex"](#) which was released (in a very slightly different edit) on TikTok over a week in advance and which [I have argued was seriously misleading](#). Particularly troubling was the claim that

Where we've come to is to say that all sexual activity should be within a committed relationship and whether it's straight or gay.

On Wednesday, Lambeth Palace [issued a statement](#) relating to that part of the interview. What follows notes four concerning elements in that statement and considers two analogous thought-experiments before exploring the important positive step these developments represent in terms of truth-telling but the potentially damaging effect this has in relation to trust and the PLF process. Before those details, however, it is important briefly to recall why this matters.

### Why does this matter?

There are at least three reasons why the Archbishop's answer and this subsequent statement are so significant.

**Firstly**, although, because of an earlier interview seven years ago (in the context of [similar interrogation of Tim Farron](#), a Christian then leading the Liberal Democrats), the question was focussed on "gay sex", the Archbishop wisely set his answer in the broader context of a Christian sexual ethic for everyone. The significance of any answer as to the content of that Christian sexual ethic arises because of the clear and consistent warnings of Scripture against "sexual immorality" (*porneia* in the Greek) which are, of course, related to a positive vision of how we flourish as sexual beings made in God's image as male and female. Although, like all sin, sexual sin, is forgiven through repentance and faith in Christ, changing the definition of sexual immorality changes (a) what patterns of sexual behaviour the church believes it needs to warn against as among the sins that risk excluding someone from the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-20) and (b) what patterns of sexual behaviour it can commend and bless.

**Secondly**, although as in any area there have been and are debates on certain matters, there is a long-standing broad ecumenical consensus among Christians which is understood to be based on Scripture. So, [in December 2019, the Church of England bishops issued a statement](#) which concluded:

With opposite sex civil partnerships, and with those for same sex couples, the Church's teaching on sexual ethics remains unchanged. For Christians, marriage – that is the lifelong union between a man and a woman, contracted with the making of vows – remains the proper context for sexual activity. In its approach to civil partnerships the Church seeks to uphold that standard, to affirm the value of committed, sexually

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abstinent friendships and to minister sensitively and pastorally to those Christians who conscientiously decide to order their lives differently (para 35).

This reflected the mind of the Anglican Communion as set out in the 1998 [Lambeth Resolution I.10](#):

in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage

It is also reaffirmed in [the Pastoral Guidance](#) published last December for use of the Prayers of Love and Faith:

The Church of England teaches that Holy Matrimony is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman, blessed by God in creation and pointing to the love between Christ and the Church; a way of life which Christ makes holy. It is within marriage that sexual intimacy finds its proper place.

As I [set out more fully a year ago](#) this is also something that the Archbishop has in the past regularly been very clear about in terms of content, importance, and authoritative sources:

- “Throughout the Bible it is clear that the right place for sex is only within a committed, heterosexual marriage” (quoted in Andrew Atherstone, [Archbishop Welby: Risk-Taker and Reconciler](#), p. 94)
- “Sexual practice is for marriage, and marriage is between men and women, and that’s the biblical position” (*ibid.*, p.125)
- “My understanding of sexual ethics has been that, regardless of whether it’s gay or straight, sex outside marriage is wrong” (*ibid.*, p. 218)
- “Sexual activity should be within marriage and marriage is between a man and a woman, and to change our understanding of that is not something we can do quickly and casually” ([St Edmundsbury Cathedral](#). March 2014)
- “The Church is quite clear that sex outside marriage is wrong and marriage is being understood as a man and a woman. That seems a fairly clear statement. The House of Bishops has just issued a pretty clear statement which has got me a lot of stick about our behaviour on issues of sexuality...My position is the historic position of the church, which is in our Canons, which says that sexual relations...should be within marriage and marriage is between a man and a woman. ...I’ve just quoted to you clearly what the Canons of the Church of England say, what the law of the Church of England says, and I think that was reasonably clear” ([LBC phone-in](#), April 2014)

**Thirdly**, the legality of the Prayers of Love and Faith also depends to a significant extent on the answer given as to the church’s sexual ethic. The published legal advice has been that it is crucial

whether or not the House maintained the position set out in the 2005 pastoral statement on civil partnerships that –

“the Church of England teaches that “sexual intercourse, as an expression of faithful intimacy, properly belongs within marriage exclusively” (Marriage: a teaching document of the House of Bishops, 1999). Sexual relationships outside marriage, whether heterosexual or between people of the same sex, are regarded as falling short of God’s

purposes for human beings”.

If that remained the Church of England’s teaching, then a service which sanctioned or condoned such a sexual relationship would not meet the requirement that a service must “edify the people” and would probably also be contrary to, or indicative of a departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in an essential matter ([GS 2055 Annex 1 para 9](#)).

This is presumably why, although the more recent legal advice has not been published, the bishops reported to General Synod a year ago that

We have also been advised that it would be difficult to say that making the PLF available for same-sex couples without there being an assumption as to their sexual relationships was not indicative of any departure from the Church’s doctrine. Existing pastoral statements of the House of Bishops (issued in 2005, 2014 and 2019) state that because some same-sex couples will be “living consistently with the teaching of the Church, others not”, it would “not be right to produce an authorised public liturgy in connection with the registering of [civil partnerships/same-sex marriages] and “that clergy of the Church of England should not provide services of blessing for those who [register a civil partnership/enter a same sex marriage]”. If the PLF are to be available for same-sex couples without there being an assumption as to their sexual relationships, there would have been a change in the Church’s formal position on what its doctrine of marriage, and the place of sex within it, did and did not preclude in terms of public worship. Such a change might indicate a departure from the previous understanding that the Church’s teaching precluded public worship being offered for a same sex couple who were or might be in a sexually active relationship ([GS 2328, para 17](#))

If the Church of England taught what the Archbishop teaches then this would not be a problem in relation to PLF and whether they were lawful. That may explain why he finds it hard to recognise that so many people are concerned about the lack of due process and consequent legal uncertainty at best in relation to the prayers.

The reality now is that the prayers’ legality seems to depend on the judgement of the House of Bishops (which commended them) that although PLF is indicative of a departure from the Church’s doctrine due to the church’s teaching on sexual ethics this departure was not “in any essential matter”. The position of the Archbishop of Canterbury and, in the words of the Lambeth statement, “the Archbishop of York and many other bishops regarding sexual intimacy” is now one indicative of a clear departure from, arguably more strongly quite simply “contrary to”, the church’s doctrine. This means that their judgment that the departure indicated in doctrine by PLF is “not essential” is not surprising. It also means that many will be sceptical about its accuracy because they cannot trust the competency of bishops who have rejected the doctrine.

## The Lambeth Palace Statement: Four Concerns

The *first* concern relates to the description quoted above that the position stated by the Archbishop (who must have thought carefully in advance of the interview how he would answer this almost inevitable question) is the position held by “many other bishops” and the claim that in the interview he “was giving a personal view”.

This again is a misrepresentation of the reality. The interview was much stronger than that with

- no disclaimer that this was simply “a personal view”
- but an explicit claim that “the bishops, by a majority” have “come to....say that all sexual activity should be within a committed relationship and whether it’s straight or gay”.
- and the clear implication that this was therefore now the stance of the bishops and therefore presumably the Church of England.

While the statement’s clarification that “His answer does not indicate a changing of teaching from the House of Bishops” is welcome, it is regrettable that there is no apology for this serious misrepresentation and no clarification as to the content of the “teaching from the House of Bishops” or sign of respect for it.

The *second* concern relates to the focus being given to the Archbishop’s “personal view”. If we are “paying attention to power” then it is likely that the stated view of the Archbishop of Canterbury has significant weight and presumed to have a degree of authority because of his position. This is particularly the case if it is not explicitly qualified as simply a personal view, claims to reflect that of the other Archbishop and “many other bishops” or even “a majority” of bishops, and no reference is made to the actual teaching of the church which takes a different view.

This leads to the *third* concern. The Church of England’s ordination vows are emphatic on the importance of doctrine for at least two practical reasons:

- a. the danger of bishops (and indeed clergy generally) simply stating their own “personal views” and effectively passing these off as having wider authority and
- b. the damage done to the church of God when its leaders believe they can unilaterally revise the church’s teaching or state their own views as if they were the church’s teaching,

In the Common Worship service for [The Ordination and Consecration of a Bishop](#) among the questions answered is the following:

Will you teach the doctrine of Christ as the Church of England has received it, will you refute error (Titus 1:9) and will you hand on entire the faith that is entrusted to you?

**Ordinand By the help of God, I will.**

This extends into the particular calling of bishops what has already been committed to in [ordination as a priest](#) with a clear purpose stated as to why this vow is needed:

Will you faithfully minister the doctrine and sacraments of Christ as the Church of England has received them, so that the people committed to your charge may be defended against error and flourish in the faith?

**Ordinands By the help of God, I will.**

[Ordination as a deacon](#) involves the following vow:

Do you believe the doctrine of the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it, and in your ministry will you expound and teach it?

**Ordinands I believe it and will so do.**

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It is also noteworthy that [the Canons](#) are clear that

Every bishop is the chief pastor of all that are within his diocese, as well laity as clergy, and their father in God; it appertains to his office to teach and to uphold sound and wholesome doctrine, and to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions; and, himself an example of righteous and godly living, it is his duty to set forward and maintain quietness, love, and peace among all men (Canon C 18.1)

Given the language of “the doctrine of Christ” in the vows, it is also important that [Canon B30](#) (“Of Holy Matrimony”) uniquely appeals to Christ’s teaching when it states (italics added):

The Church of England affirms, *according to our Lord's teaching*, that marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, *for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections*, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

In the light of this a *fourth* and final concern is the extraordinary fact the Archbishop felt it necessary both in his interview and in the following statement to state (apparently in an attempt to reassure) that those who “hold a traditional view” (presumably even if they also seek to expound and teach it, hand it on entire, and defend it against error) have “a full and undoubted place in the Church of England” whose teaching they, in contrast to him, continue to believe.

## Two Thought-Experiments

In order to try to minimise the influence of different responses on the specific question of sexual ethics it might be helpful to ask what the response would be in two other analogous areas which raise questions about the place of personal views in relation to corporate convictions and the teaching of the church.

Given that it was Alastair Campbell who was interviewing the Archbishop it may be helpful first to consider a political situation. Imagine a Cabinet minister in an interview entered into an area known to be of high political controversy by claiming the support of a majority of (or even simply “many”) colleagues for a view which was clearly contrary to the agreed stance of the government. It is not hard to imagine what Campbell’s reaction would be or how he would advise the Prime Minister to respond. The minister’s defence that this was simply “a personal view”, particularly if not connected to a recognition of, and respect for, the collective position, would be unlikely to be viewed as an adequate clarification and resolution of the matter.

One might here also contrast the stance of Archbishop Justin with that of his predecessor who from shortly after his appointment made clear how he related his previously articulated personal views to his role of Archbishop as in his statement shortly after his appointment and [this 2008 interview](#)

As Archbishop I have a different task. I would feel very uncomfortable if my Church would say: this is beyond discussion, for ever. Equally I have to guard the faith and teaching of the Church. My personal ideas and questions have to take second place.

A second thought-experiment is to go back beyond Rowan Williams to his predecessor, George Carey. To the surprise and disappointment of many, he has in recent years changed his mind

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and come to hold personal views strongly supportive of assisted suicide. His public espousal of these has gained attention because he is a former Archbishop of Canterbury. The question arises as to whether there would have been any problem if he had reached these views and acted in this way while still Archbishop. Alternatively, it could be asked whether if Archbishop Justin found in this area that he now supported assisted suicide because, to quote the Lambeth Statement, “his thinking has evolved over the years through much prayer and theological reflection...and he now holds this view sincerely” it would be acceptable to answer a question on assisted suicide in the manner in which he answered that on “gay sex”.

## The Lambeth Palace Statement: Truth and Trust

As noted above, the Archbishop of Canterbury has previously very clearly expressed strong commitment to the church’s teaching and the view that this teaching is biblical teaching. Many have suspected, or picked up hints ([sometimes in public](#)), that this was no longer the case. He has, however, for some time been avowedly “copping out” (as in his [2017 interview with Campbell](#)) or even been clear that he is unwilling to make his views known more clearly, notably in December 2022 in relation to [same-sex marriage in church](#). He also spoke then of the need “to be convinced before God that it’s the right moment” to speak out because of his role as a focus of unity.

What marks out the interview and following Lambeth Palace Statement is that here there appears to be an adherence to the Pastoral Principle of “speak into silence” and a decision that he needs to be “honest that his thinking has evolved over the years”. Sadly, though, there is no explanation as to “*why now?*” and, more seriously – as with the House of Bishops more widely in relation to PLF – no attempt to answer the question of “*what is the biblical or theological rationale for this change?*”. The nearest answer is the statement that his new view

reflects his commitment to continuing to welcome, love and include LGBTQ+ people more fully in the life of the Church

This language has interesting echoes of the recently published book by Richard Hays and Christopher Hays (*The Widening of God’s Mercy*) which may also explain the timing of the statement. However, as with that book, there is no explanation as to why in order “to welcome, love and include LGBTQ+ people more fully in the life of the Church” it follows that it is either right or necessary to rewrite the church’s sexual ethic. In fact, [in a recent interview](#), surprisingly using the same language of “gay sex”, Richard Hays has been quite clear in the way the Archbishop was not:

My exegesis of those half dozen passages, it hasn’t changed. I think the Bible says what it says, and disapproves of gay sex, full stop.

There is also in this line of argument the danger of implying that the church’s teaching, and those who believe it and seek to order their lives and the life of the church in accordance with it, are inherently unable to (or at least severely limited in their ability to) genuinely “welcome, love and include LGBTQ+ people”. This may be an area where, in order to find a way forward, there needs to be some even more painful truth-telling by those seeking change about how they view church teaching.

This “honesty”, or more transparent truth-telling, is something that must surely be welcomed despite all the continuing problems with the Archbishop’s interview and statement. The danger



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is that unless it is extended further and factored into the ongoing PLF/LLF process, it will simply make that process even more difficult.

For many people, this truth-telling is also sadly and seriously trust-eroding. It confirms suspicions concerning what we have experienced in the last two years since the start of the LLF discernment process among the bishops. It bolsters the belief that we have had two Archbishops and “many other bishops”, who no longer believe the church’s teaching they promised to uphold, pushing forward changes in the life of the church that undermine and depart from that teaching while presenting weak [legal](#) and [theological](#) arguments in their defence and claiming not to change that teaching, even repeating the teaching the Archbishop has now denied.

Many of them, including the Archbishops, sought to reassure people by voting for the Cornes amendment in February 2023 where Synod voted to

Endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England

It is also now clear why so many people were right to be alarmed when [last July](#) it was reported to Synod that rather than using the usual B2 process or even commendation the House and College were “particularly weighing up the option of approval by the Archbishops (under Canon B4.2)” (GS 2303 para 13). If we can have both Archbishops publicly disavowing the church’s teaching there are serious problems with ever using this canonical process to authorise liturgy on any matter touching on doctrine.

What the Archbishop’s comments have done, perhaps unintentionally, is uncover a fundamental root of the problem with the whole process. This explains why so many believe that what has been engineered is a dishonest *de facto* change of doctrine without following the proper due process of doctrinal discernment in relation to our liturgy. It was, it seems, thought that somehow this way forward was necessary and justifiable, as a means to the end of preserving our unity as much as possible given our disagreements. In fact, as is now becoming increasingly clear, it has predictably done the opposite.

In finding a way forward it may be helpful to return to the earlier 2017 Campbell interview. There – in relation to the wider Communion and the need to reconcile “Ugandan bishops and the liberals who believe something very different” the Archbishop uttered the for him surprising words:

It is irreconcilable.

The whole approach thus far with PLF has appeared to assume that, within the Church of England, this is not the case. In order to pursue this there have been

- multiple attempts to “[square the circle](#)”
- rather than [face our differences](#) honestly and theologically,
- constantly changing positions and explanations, and
- until now a certain unclarity about the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

This is one major reason why the whole process has proved particularly difficult and painful and eroded so much trust.

Although for me the recent interview and now the Lambeth Palace Statement are deeply disappointing this dark cloud may have the proverbial silver lining if there is more truth-telling going forward. At the heart of this is that the bishops need to do what they have currently seemingly failed to do. This is honestly to address the conflict between the official teaching of the church and the view which the Archbishops and many other bishops now “hold...sincerely”. There are at least two competing and, yes, “irreconcilable” visions for holiness and faithful Christian discipleship. These differences stem in large part from different approaches to Scripture which, as the LLF book stated, we are all agreed is given us in part “to call the whole world into holiness” ([LLF book](#), p. 275).

The current approach has been for the bishops

- to restate the received teaching as still the church’s teaching
- but for individual bishops and now the Archbishop of Canterbury publicly to dissent from this and offer an alternative teaching and
- for the House and College to drive forward changes which practically everyone who believes the received teaching cannot accept
- and have previously been held to be incompatible with current law and doctrine
- through processes which bypass the proper procedures to reach a common mind on liturgical developments.

The new “honesty” of the Archbishop now places us in a situation where

- *either* that approach is continued at the risk of those who hold the church’s teaching losing whatever remains of their trust in, and respect for, the church’s senior leaders who do not hold that teaching
- *or* there is more honesty and truth-telling about where we stand and a way found to re-order our common life to recognise the implications of
  - many bishops having found that their “thinking has evolved over the years through much prayer and theological reflection – particularly through the Living in Love and Faith process”
  - but the teaching of the church not having evolved in the same way
  - and many in the church being unable to accept episcopal ministry from those who teach their “personal view” and order the church on the basis of that rather than on the church’s teaching in line with their ordination vows.