

Unity and division (Dan)

So unity is given by God the Father, bought with the blood of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit. Unity is something that Jesus prays for, and that we're urged to maintain.

But everyone draws the line at unity somewhere. I will happily work with Baptists and Methodists and Pentecostals and so on – even though I disagree with them on some points of theology. I'll happily work with Catholics on some things – even though I disagree with them a bit more. I wouldn't work with Christadelphians along the road or Jehovah's Witnesses on Romsey Road because they deny the divinity of Christ.

Sometimes our willingness to work with others depends on the circumstances. I would find it very difficult to join with leaders of other faiths in a service of worship – especially if it gave the impression that all religions are basically the same. But when there was a lot of racial tension after the Brexit vote, I said to the schools that I would happily work with local Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist leaders to speak out against racial prejudice and violence.

So everyone draws the line at unity somewhere. Even in the NT, there are occasions when the apostles speak very sharply about other leaders in the church – calling them false teachers, accusing them of heresy, urging the ordinary Christians not to associate with them.

So how do we decide where to draw the line – when to stay united despite our disagreements, and when to distance ourselves, because of our disagreements?

In John 17, Jesus starts off by praying for the 12 apostles. He **prays**, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one ... Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth..." So Jesus has given the apostles God's word; that is the truth which sanctifies them, sets them apart.

He then goes on to pray for all believers **like this**: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." The oneness of unity comes because of the one message we believe in. Our unity is built on the truth of God's word.

But of course, that makes unity even harder when we have sharp differences about the truth of God's word!

In Romans, Paul is dealing with groups in the church – some of whom think it's ok to eat meat, others who think they should stick to veg. Paul describes these as 'opinions' or 'disputable matters'. He says it's fine for people to have different opinions on such things, it's fine to agree to disagree – each person should go with their own prayerful conscience, and that both opinions should welcome each other. At other times, Paul is vehement that anyone who thinks differently to him is wrong. So in Galatians he says, "if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!"

So Christians sometimes talk about first order issues and second order issues. **First order** issues are ones that are essential to the faith, so crucial, that if we change them, the whole thing collapses. **Second order** issues are ones where it's fine for Christians to hold a variety of opinions.

What counts as a first order issue? Some would say that it's anything that relates to the doctrines summarised in the Apostles' Creed. So doctrines like the Trinity, the virgin birth, the deity of Jesus, the resurrection, the second coming and so on – these are all first order issues – ones that are essential to genuine Christian faith. Others want to include other doctrines as essential, as first order issues: things like the authority of the Bible. What's a second order issue? Things like how we do baptism, the right way to conduct a worship service, the best form of church governance, how to take communion etc.

So is the blessing of gay relationships a first order issue, or a second order issue? Sadly we can't even agree on that! Some people say it's a second order issue - it's fine to agree to disagree about this. It's not in the creed, so it's what Paul calls a 'disputable matter' – one where there is no definitive right answer.

Others say that it's a first order issue – that it's so important that we cannot simply agree to disagree. Let me give 3 reasons why. First, because they say that **Scripture is uniformly clear** in not endorsing same-sex sexual relationships. Yes, they hear some of the arguments and interpretations like Lena put forward last time, but they are so unpersuaded by them that it feels like those who take this revisionist line are undermining the authority of Scripture. If Scripture is clear about something, and you mould Scripture to say the opposite, you are not sitting under the authority of Scripture, you are sitting over it. And because the doctrine of the authority of Scripture is fundamental – you pull the plug on that, and you potentially pull the plug on any other doctrine in the future. That's the first reason some see this as a first order issue.

A second reason is because of the way Scripture speaks about the **seriousness of any sexual immortality**. Last time we looked at 1 Corinthians 6. It says, "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Now, there are those, like Lena, who say that the words translated by the phrase 'men who have sex with men' isn't referring to loving, monogamous homosexual partnerships. But it is clear that the sexually immoral and others will not inherit the kingdom of God – they are heading for destruction. So this issue isn't of the same order as a debate, say, over the rights and wrongs of infant baptism or spiritual gifts. Those don't impact on someone's eternal salvation. But to teach that homosexual relationships are ok is to lead people away from the kingdom of God. It's a salvation issue, therefore it's a first order issue.

A passage in Revelation is also relevant. In Revelation 2, Jesus rebukes the church in Thyatira for their tolerance of a false teacher: "I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual

immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.”

Sam Alberry writes this: “This is someone whose teaching leads others in the church into sexual sin. Jesus promises judgment on her and any of her followers who do not repent. But the responsibility lies not just with them. The church- including the many who do not follow her-are rebuked for tolerating her. So we are not to tolerate in our churches those whose teaching leads people into sexual sin. They must be confronted, their ministry forbidden, and their teaching refuted. This is a gospel matter. If we allow this to be a matter of acceptable disagreement within our fellowships, Jesus will hold it against us. Some forms of tolerance are sinful.”

Now that’s really uncomfortable, isn’t it, not least because tolerance is supposedly one of the great virtues of our culture. But Jesus says some forms of tolerance are sinful.

A third reason some people see this as a first order issue is more of an Anglican one. The written basis of the Anglican Church is encapsulated in something called the 39 articles, part of the book of Common Prayer. They say that to bless a same-sex relationship is to de facto change the **doctrine of marriage**, something that is defined in the 39 articles. Even if it’s possible to argue that prayers of blessing aren’t the same as a marriage service, we can be sure that proposals for a full same-sex marriage service will come along in a few years. So this is a first order issue because it’s making a change to the historical Anglican doctrine of marriage.

So – is this a first or second order issue?

Lots of Anglicans around the world are clear that this is a first order issue. After the General Synod meeting in February, a group called the Global South Fellowship of Anglicans issued a statement saying that the CofE has departed from the historic faith passed down from the apostles and has therefore disqualified herself from being the mother church of the Anglican Communion. Similarly, that group no longer recognise Archbishop Justin Welby as the first among equals leader of the Anglican Communion. Together, they represent many of the Anglicans in Africa, plus other nations including Brazil, Myanmar, Pakistan and others. So that’s a significant chunk of Anglicans who no longer recognise Justin Welby as leader or the CofE as mother church. It feels like the structures of the Anglican Communion worldwide are starting to split on this issue.

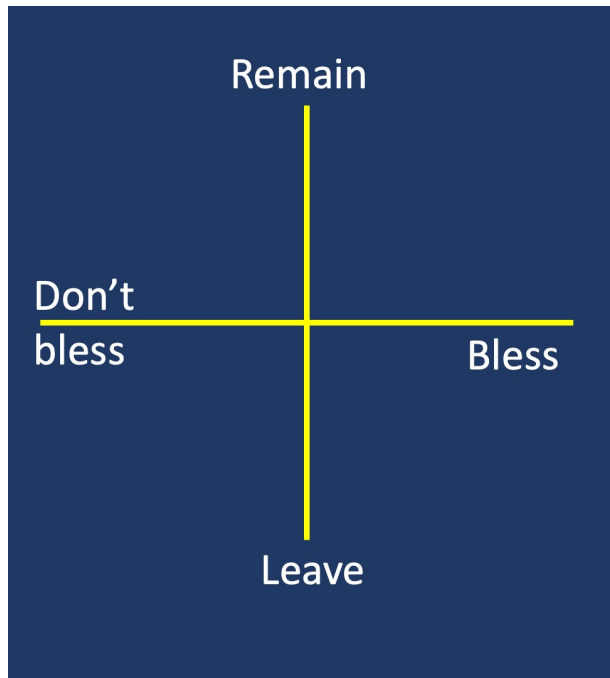
Within the Church of England, many bishops would recognise that our differences on same sex blessings are irreconcilable. A few bishops see this as a first order issue and are calling for new structures to be put in place to create a twin-track CofE.

Within our own church, one person has already left over this issue, because they disagree with the direction of travel of the CofE. And a few have withheld their giving whilst waiting for greater clarity as a form of protest about the overall direction of the CofE on this issue.

So many around the world, and some in the UK definitely see this as a first order issue.

I wonder what you think? In a few minutes, we’ll get you to discuss a bit, but first, I want to introduce this **chart** to you. It seems to me like there are two key questions in this whole

debate: do you **agree or disagree** with the principle of blessing same-sex relationships? And do you think this is a second order issue (in which case you'd **stay** in this church, even if you disagreed with me, or disagreed with the CofE as a whole), or do you think this is a first order issue (in which case you might leave this church).



I expect there will be some people in each of the 4 quadrants. **Lena** has said that she thinks it's ok to bless same-sex marriages but is willing to stay in this church. **Others** will agree with Lena about blessing same-sex marriages, but for them they can't countenance being in a church with me as vicar if I don't allow this. That of course makes me very sad, but I know it might happen. **Others** will disagree with blessing same-sex relationships and want to stay part of this church even if the CofE as a whole goes forward with this. **Others** will disagree with the blessings, but won't want to stay part of the CofE because they view it as too liberal. Of course, it would be a bit ironic for people to leave the church if they agree with me, but again, I know that might happen.

Now, I don't want to leave you despairing for our church or the CofE. Yes these are difficult days. Disagreement is never easy. I want us to remember two things: **Jesus is Lord of his church**. He is bigger than our disagreements. He holds us together even when we struggle to stay together. More than that, he can use all things for our good. I don't doubt that he can use even our differences and disagreements for his purposes. If the Anglican communion fractures over this, or if the Church of England fractures over this – God can use that too to serve his kingdom purposes. So Jesus is Lord of his church; he is the one who binds us together. Under his Lordship, we remain sisters and brothers, whichever local church or denomination we're part of.

Second, let's come back to that **verse from Ephesians** about making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. How do we keep our unity despite our differences? Paul said in the preceding verse "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." So in all our conversation about these painful issues, let's be humble, gentle, patient, loving. Let's bear with one another, forgive one another,

encourage one another as sisters and brothers. I'll say again what I said in my pastoral letter: the devil would love to use this as an opportunity to drive wedges between us. So we all need to work even harder than normal to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

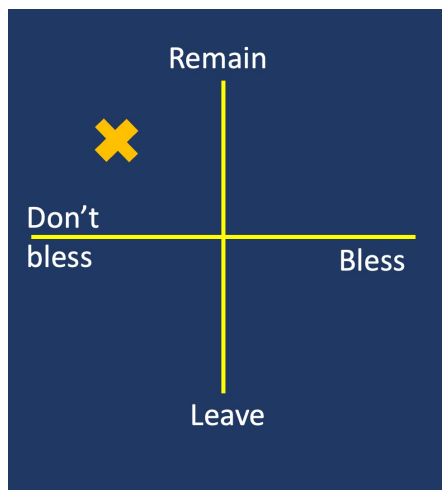
Two questions for discussion:

Where would you plot yourself on this chart?

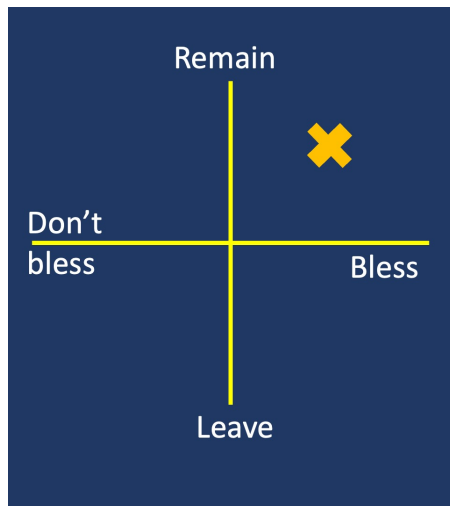
What would it look like for you to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit with those you disagree with at the moment?

Closing Pastoral words

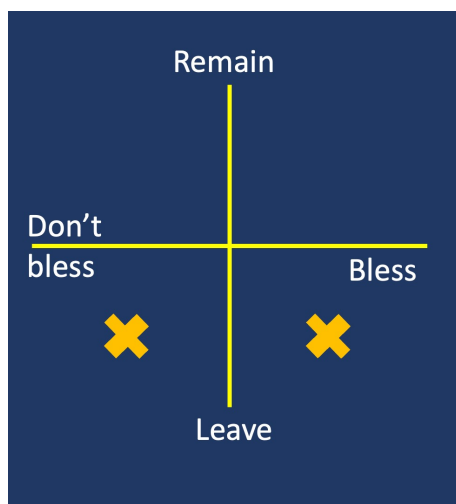
I want to say something brief to each of these four quadrants, and this might be the most important thing I say this evening.



[first quadrant] I fear that those who disagree with the blessings but stay in the church will stop listening to and learning from Lena. Lena is an incredible example of faithful sacrificial service to the Lord and his people. I disagree with her on this issue, but I have learned so much from her on so many other issues. If you're in that quadrant, please don't now stop learning from and listening to Lena.



Similarly, if you're in **this quadrant** – you disagree with me about blessings, but you're going to stay part of the church. My fear is that you could begin to drift spiritually, because you'll stop listening to me and learning from me. You'll stay part of the community, but detach yourself slightly from everything I say, or take it all with a bit of a pinch of salt. Now, yes, you need to weigh everything I say. But if you detach yourself too much from too much of what I say, you will drift spiritually. And over time that will lead to spiritual decline. That would be a tragedy. If you're struggling with me because of this issue, remember that I haven't changed. I'm still here to live care for and pastor everyone who comes. My leadership style hasn't changed. It's just this issue has come to surface. If you were ok with me before, you will manage with me in the future. But if you can tell that you're struggling with me, let's chat. You are precious to me.



And a word for those who might be in these **bottom quadrants**, thinking of leaving. First, don't leave just yet: let's wait and see what Synod decides in November. Of course, I will be desperately sad to see anyone leave, but you must do what is right by your conscience, after much study of the Scriptures and prayer. But can I plead with you that if you're going to leave, leave well. In my experience, when people leave a church badly – ie just slope off quietly – then you will struggle to join a new church well. And again, you will therefore drift spiritually. In some church traditions, people who move churches take a letter of

commendation from their old pastor to their new one. I quite like that. Whether you agree with me or disagree with me on the blessings question, I want to help you leave well – I want to affirm you as a child of God, thank you for what you've given to us as a fellowship, pray for you as you head elsewhere. I want to be able to explain to others so that unhelpful rumours don't circulate. That's what I mean by leaving well. And when you leave well, you will then find it much easier to join well elsewhere. But please, again, if you're thinking of leaving, come and chat. I won't bite!