

A review of the Report of The Episcopal Church's Task Force on the Study of Marriage

Introduction

At its meeting in Salt Lake City on June 25-July 3 2015 the General Convention of The Episcopal Church voted for two developments that would permit same sex 'marriages' to be solemnized in its churches.

First it voted to introduce a new Canon on marriage which omits all references to husband and wife.

Secondly it authorized for experimental and permissive use a set of liturgical resources entitled 'I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing' which contains material suitable for the blessing of a same-sex marriage. In 2018, the next General Convention will vote again, and a majority of all lay deputies, priests, and bishops must vote again to approve the liturgy. At that point, the TEC Book of Common Prayer would be officially revised and material for same-sex 'marriages' would be fully authorized.

Underlying these two developments was a report from The Episcopal Church's 'Task Force on the Study of Marriage' which was set up by the General Convention in 2012 with the mandate to 'identify and explore biblical, theological, historical, liturgical, and canonical dimensions of marriage.'

This report consists of seven essays, but it is the first two essays, 'A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage' and 'Christian Marriage as Vocation,' that are the theological heart of the report. They set out a theological view of marriage that makes room for marriage to encompass same-sex relationships.

'A Biblical and Theological Framework for thinking about marriage' argues that what makes a marriage holy and Christian is the degree of mutual love shown by the couple involved:

'...the primary 'good' of marriage, its primary moral and ethical value, lies in the extent to which the couple express the love with which Christ loved his body and the Church, and in how they fulfil the mutual duty to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, and to forsake all others to remain faithful until the end — as an apprehension of the *eschaton*, a sign of the reign of God rather than the continuation of an earthly realm. The loving context in which and by which marriage enfolds the couple becomes an enacted parable for the community of the Church, as it 'preaches Christ' to a wider world.'

The fact that the primary 'good' of marriage lies in pointing towards the world to come means that it has no necessary connection with procreation since procreation is 'necessary in this world to continue the species, but no longer needed in 'the resurrection' (Luke 20:34-36). Because what lies at the heart of marriage is mutual love, it follows that:

'It is not the respective maleness and femaleness of a couple that make them 'suitable helpers' to each other, but rather the extent to which the couple can in fact serve each other as a "help and comfort in prosperity and adversity" and in 'mutual joy.' As with Adam's initial choice, and God's tolerant waiting on Adam's decision, it is up to each human being to recognize the helper suitable to each.'

'Christian Marriage as Vocation' describes marriage as a particular form of the general Christian vocation to live a life of love (see Matthew 22:37-40, John 13:34-35, Romans 13:9). This general vocation to love, it declares:

'...can find a more particular expression through the love of two spouses for one another. It is a love that draws couples together in shared sexuality, affirming the goodness of our embodiment and desire. It is a love of discovery that delights in a lifetime of adventures lived, challenges faced, insights shared. It is a vocation that rejoices in seeing and being seen and known by spouses who can reveal to one another what, individually, they could never have perceived on their own. "It is not good that *ha adam* should be alone," God declares in Genesis 2:18: 'I will make him a helper as his partner.'

This vocation to marital love need not be limited to couples of the opposite sex because the 'interplay of difference and unity in Christian marriage need not be limited to male and female, but it can be activated by all manner of human difference.' This means that

'...although the vocation of Christian marriage has historically been limited to heterosexual couples, the mystery it illumines arguably need not require this. Marriage's unambiguous and unambivalent embrace of the full spectrum of human difference, including that of sexual orientation, can enable it to image forth the rich variety of creation more fully than it has been able to in centuries past.'

Finally, the essay argues that just as not all Christians are called to marriage, not all married couples are called to parenthood. The unstated corollary of this is that marriage does not need to be between a man and a woman in order to enable procreation.

Why these arguments don't work

The arguments for same-sex 'marriage' just outlined don't work because they distort the teaching of Scripture.

In Genesis 1 and 2 marriage is established by God as an exclusive life long relationship between one man and one woman which provides the proper context for the fulfilment of God's command to human beings 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1:28). After the Fall and during the Old Testament period this view of marriage becomes blurred because of the advent of polygamy and the permission given for divorce. However, it is re-asserted by Jesus (Matthew 19:3-9) and it becomes the norm which we find in the New Testament as a whole and in the subsequent history of the Church.

For St. Paul, both in Ephesians 5:21-32 (on which both essays base their understanding of marriage), and in the rest of his letters, marriage is never referred to in a way that suggests that he sees it in general terms as involving unity and difference between two individuals regardless of sex. He sees it instead in specific terms as a relationship of unity and difference between a man and a woman. He always talks about husbands and wives, not partner A and partner B (see 1 Corinthians 7:3, Ephesians 5:25 we read 'Husbands, love your wives,' and Colossians 3:18).

The reason that same-sex sexual activity is rejected in the Bible in passages such as Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13 and Romans 1:26-27 is because such activity contradicts the fact that sex was intended by God to take place solely between a married couple of the opposite sex.

The fundamental mistake that both essays make is to isolate the practice of love between two people as what the first essay calls 'the core of the meaning of marriage' and using this as a basis for saying that marriage does not need to involve two people of the opposite sex. It can only make this move by ignoring the biblical witness that the nature of marriage is laid out for us in the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 and that this means that marriage is about an exclusive and life long relationship of love between a husband and a wife and as such is open to the possibility of procreation. Seeing things in this way is not a matter of arbitrarily privileging one element of the biblical witness over the rest. It is instead honouring the whole biblical witness by taking seriously the framework within which the Bible tackles issues to do with marriage and sexual activity.

There is a well known logical fallacy known as the 'association fallacy' which says that because one thing has some of the qualities associated with another thing it therefore possesses all the qualities of that thing. An example of this would be the statement 'dogs have four legs, my cat has four legs, therefore my cat is a dog.' The first two parts of this statement are fine. The problem comes with the third part which extrapolates from the fact that cats and dogs have one thing in common to the claim that cats and dogs are identical, thus ignoring the differences between them.

The two essays we have looked at from the report of The Episcopal Church's Task Force on Marriage are guilty of the association fallacy. In their case the fallacy goes like this: 'marriage is a loving relationship between two people, a relationship between two people of the same sex can be a loving relationship, therefore a relationship between two people of the same sex can be a marriage. As before, the problem comes with the third part of this statement. Marriage is meant to be a loving relationship between two people. Relationships between two people of the same sex can be loving relationships. However, this does not mean that all loving relationships are marriage.

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