

A review of the report on 'The theology of Marriage' by the Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church

On 14 June 2015 the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church voted to change its Canon relating to marriage. What has been agreed is that if the necessary 2/3 majorities in the General Synod are achieved during a two year process beginning in 2016 the clause in Canon 31 referring to marriage being between a man and a woman will be deleted thus allowing 'marriage' of same-sex couples in the churches of the Scottish Episcopal Church from 2017. General Synod also voted to add a conscience clause that would ensure that no member of the clergy would be obliged to solemnise a same-sex 'marriage.'

The debate in the General Synod was resourced by a report on *The Theology of Marriage* from the Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church which set out the arguments for three options. Option A. No change in the Canons, and hence maintaining a definition of marriage as a union 'of one man and one woman.' Option B. A change in the canons such as will enable the SEC to incorporate same-sex marriage. Option C. moderate change or parallel provision, allowing for blessings of same-sex covenant partnerships. This paper will examine the arguments put forward in the report in support of Option B, which was the option voted for by the General Synod. These arguments will be considered under the four headings used in the report.

Marriage as for procreation

Under this heading the report puts forward four arguments in response to the idea that because procreation is one of the reasons for marriage same-sex 'marriage' is therefore unacceptable. (1) The 'primary reason' why God provides a companion for Adam in Genesis was not procreation, but because 'it is not good for man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). (2) It is reductive to see 'one flesh union' solely in terms of procreation. Non-procreative sexual unions that focus on purposes for loving union other than procreation can 'transform and enrich what it means to bring forth children and sustain a family system.' (3) Same-sex marriage can be seen to be in accordance with nature given that having a homosexual orientation can be seen to be natural amongst animals and for some human beings. (4) The healthy nurture and education of children does not depend on sexual differentiation between parents and carers.

What are we to make of these points? The answer is that none of them is persuasive. (1) It is a mistake to separate Genesis 1 and 2 and therefore marriage and procreation. In the creation narratives read as a whole marriage and procreation go together. (2) Non-procreative unions are not needed to enhance traditional marriage. It simply is not the case that those in traditional marriages are focused purely on having children and therefore neglect other forms of the loving union between husband and wife. (3) An appeal to nature in support of same-sex marriage does not work. We cannot move from the alleged homosexual behaviour of other animals to what is natural for human beings. (4) The claim that the outcomes for children of same-sex parents are broadly similar to those for the children of opposite sex parents fails to take into account the growing body of academic and anecdotal evidence that same-sex parenting can be harmful to children and the decades of research shows that children succeed best when they are brought up by married parents of the opposite sex.

Marriage as a remedy against sin

In this section the report argues that same-sex marriage should be seen as a 'remedy against sin' because it will help to discipline and order sexual desire within the bounds of Christian holiness and prevent gay men engaging in sexual promiscuity. It also argues that the fact that Scripture and 'the Christian world today' make provision for polygamous relationships and that Scripture disagrees with itself about whether marriage is indissoluble shows that a 'lifelong 'one man one woman' relationship' is not a 'non-negotiable' characteristic of marriage in the Bible. As the report sees it, some people are called to be married, some not (1 Corinthians 7:17), and the distinction does not fall according to our sexuality.

What are we to make of these arguments? As before, these arguments are unconvincing. (1) In the Bible, all forms of same-sex activity are seen as sinful because they fall outside the limits for sexual activity laid down by God at creation and is therefore forbidden by God's law (Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:10). (2) A same-sex marriage can therefore no more be a remedy against sin than an adulterous or incestuous marriage would be. (3) The provision for divorce in Scripture and the limited provision made in the Old Testament and in the Church for

polygamous relationships do not negate the teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 endorsed by Jesus (Matthew 19:1-9) that God intends marriage to be a life-long relationship between one man and one woman. (4) The Bible nowhere suggests that marriage is open to those of the same-sex. Those who are called to marriage are called to heterosexual marriage (see 1 Corinthians 7 throughout).

Mutual comfort and support

In this section the report offers four arguments. (1) The Church already recognizes partnerships that are not exclusive or lifelong are nonetheless marriages. (2) Developing a gender neutral form of marriage would open up marriage for those who don't fit into the binary categories of male or female, because they have an intersex condition, see themselves as 'both male or female, or neither' or who are transsexual or transgender. (3) Same-sex marriages would provide 'healing' and 'positive role-models' for homosexual people which are needed because of the negative messages that they have received from the Church and society. (4) People who are married complement each other because of who they are and the way that their relationships develop and not because men and women are essentially complementary to each other.

What are we to make of these arguments? Once again they are unconvincing. (1) Anglican churches do not recognize polygamous relationships as authentic Christian marriages and marriages that take place after divorce are entered into for life. No provision is made for time limited marriages. (2) Moving to gender neutral marriage would not help people with confusion about their sexual identity to live as the according to their God given sexual identity, but merely increase this confusion further. (3) It would also not help people with same-sex attraction to live lives in conformity with God's will, but will potentially make it more difficult by sending out a message that trying to do so is unnecessary. (4) The denial that the complementarity between men and women is relevant to the existence of complementarity in marriage is highly problematic. It involves a rejection of the teaching on Genesis 1 and 2 and from the biological and social sciences that men and women are different from each other in a whole variety of significant ways and that the positive combination of these differences is vital for human life in general and for marriage in particular.

Marriage as reflecting the love of Christ for the Church and the very nature of God's character and love.

The report puts forward two arguments in this section. (1) Just like traditional marriage, same-sex marriage can 'also signify the mystical union between Christ and the Church' (2) the authority of the Scottish Book of Common Prayer of 1929 can be upheld even if the marriage Canon is altered because (a) the Scottish Episcopal Church gives authority to all authorized liturgies and not just to the Scottish Prayer Book and (b) 'it is anyway not clear from the Prayer Book that marriage between a man and a woman is the only form of relationship that can reflect the mystical union between Christ and the Church.'

What are we to make of these arguments? Yet again they fail to convince. (1) In Scripture same-sex relationships are a sign of humanity's estrangement from God (see Romans 1:18-27) rather than a sign of the union between Christ and his church. (2) Although the proposal to allow same-sex 'marriages' in the Scottish Episcopal Church may not formally involve a rejection of the authority of the 1929 Prayer Book, materially it involves the rejection of the authority of the tradition of Christian thought which that Prayer Book represents. The reason that the 1929 Prayer Book does not rule out same-sex partnerships was not because those who compiled it wanted to leave room for them, but because such relationships were so obviously wrong that they were not even worth mentioning.

Conclusion

As we have seen, none of the arguments put forward in support of same-sex 'marriage' in the report from the Doctrine Committee show that this is a development that has the support of either Scripture, tradition or reason. What is argued is that a relationship between two people of the same-sex can have the same value within Christian theology as a marriage between a man and a woman and that it provides an equally beneficial setting for the raising of children. As we have seen in this paper, the first of these arguments is definitely wrong and there is a growing body of evidence that the second is wrong as well.

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