

A response to ‘The Church of England’s Doctrine of Marriage’, +Fulham *et al*

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I thought it might be useful to offer a few thoughts on the most recent paper by a number of bishops, of differing theologies and yet in opposition to same-sex marriage. The original paper can be found here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aYyMitqZL7c0ftjxM3_maGmptBzVVz_D/view.

It’s notable that these bishops come from different theological stables, which probably does give some indication as to why the resulting theology here is so disappointingly light and unconvincing. It appears to lack a coherence theological thread and suffers because of it. Nonetheless, it is good that bishops are finally willing to say what they think – even if we might disagree with it. The risk of saying what you think, of course, is that your arguments are open to challenge. This is my small offering in that regard.

In the first instance, the paper does not offer what it claims to offer – ‘a relatively short theological summary of the doctrine of marriage as the Church of England has received it, and **how it relates particularly to changes in society around same-sex partnerships**’ (my emphasis). Instead, the paper seems to be a rallying call for those who do not want marriage to be extended – starting from that premise, and then building arguments backwards in order to support that position. There is no serious analysis of the sociological changes in society (more on this below), nor on the changes across Christian traditions, or the understanding of sexuality from the perspective of science and human experience. This is rather regrettable. Refusing to engage with science and experience is ultimately a refusal to engage with gifts of God to His church – this is surely not an acceptable form of theological reflection.

Christ and His church

Much of the paper relies on the metaphor of Christ and His church. This is not new ground, and the paper references Ephesians 5 as would be expected. There is not, however, any serious engagement with the theological challenges that the implied way of reading Ephesians might present to the modern – including ecclesial – understanding of marriage, and in fact the more uncomfortable elements (we might think of verses 22 to 24 in the first instance) are not engaged with whatsoever. It is, of course, possible to read this passage as one in which the husband’s relationship to the wife directly maps onto that of Christ for the church – but it is disingenuous, at the very least, to suggest that this hierarchical

understanding of marriage is the normative one found preached and practiced in the Church of England. To make use of the metaphor in such a simplistic way is surely to deprive the 'mystery' it contains of much of the imaginative theological depth that it might otherwise have. I have written about this more fully in *Queer Holiness*, reproduced for information at the end of this article*.

The key issue in this particular paper is that one interpretative reading is emphasised, without any apparent recognition of the inevitable ramifications of that reading for opposite sex marriage. That the BCP contains reference to Ephesians 5 is not in doubt; whether the use of this passage actually reflects current practice and general theological and doctrinal understandings of marriage as the Church of England has received *and* – just as importantly – continues to proclaim and celebrate it is a key question that the authors of this paper have not engaged with, significantly weakening their argument. The Church's reception of doctrine is not a historical entity – it is surely a living process. That is to say nothing of the implications of reading Ephesians 5 in such a way for the role of women, not least in the church (the authors refer to 'destructive forms of patriarchy' later in the paper, but remarkably do not appear to recognise the link to this narrow reading of Ephesians).

The French Revolution

It has to be said that a paper that purports to seriously engage with recent sociological developments falls rather short when the 'blame', as it were, is laid at the feet of the French Revolution. The section in the paper that references this is certainly interesting, but is hardly the kind of analysis that provides anything like a convincing or serious case to answer. It ends (notably with reference to only one volume, with no critical appraisal offered whatsoever) with the almost astounding sentence:

This is why the movement towards same-sex marriage could be regarded as inevitable in our culture, because of deeply-rooted values we have taken for granted since the eighteenth century.

To be generous, the 'this' in the above sentence appears to be doing a lot of what might be described as 'heavy lifting'.

The generalities

There are a number of generalities offered in this paper, such as statements about Christians seeing the world 'differently', the role of order in creation, and 'givenness'. None of this is really up for debate; the problem being that the paper then frequently leads into logical dead ends, or more importantly seduces the reader into avenues of 'so therefore' which themselves, on reflection, do not naturally follow at all. An example might be (my comments in italics and parentheses):

In this scheme, biological difference is not accidental but deliberate and good (*entirely right, although this is not confined to a Christian understanding, and indeed we might suggest that Christianity is a religion that emphasizes not the difference but the underlying human dignity that surpasses all differences*). As a result (*and here is the false turn*), Christians have generally believed that something sacramental happens when the two constituent parts of our species are joined as one, when male and

female are joined together in a lifelong exclusive union (*this appears to be quite a modern reading of the first two chapters of Genesis and is by no means the only way this passage – which is presumably what is being obliquely referenced here – is interpreted, from the Patristic era onwards*).

It is somewhat concerning that here, and throughout the document, so little knowledge of varying, traditional (in the meaning of ‘of the tradition’) ways of understanding and interpreting scripture is evident. Given the authors, this surely cannot be the case, which in itself does not suggest this paper offers what can correctly be called a ‘theological summary’.

Jesus’s definition of marriage

An interesting turn during the period of LLF has been the emphasis placed by a large number of self-professed conservatives on the ‘definition’ that Jesus gives to marriage, usually making reference to Matthew 19:4-6. This is a faulty piece of logic, and one that underlies much of this paper, so it worth briefly addressing.

In the first instance, those who use this scripture to justify their position (in what is, it seems, rather obvious post-hoc reasoning) conveniently forget to include verse 3 in their analysis – a verse which gives the specific context to Jesus’s words: ‘some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?”. Jesus is not giving His view on marriage – he is giving his view on divorce, something that, rather surprisingly, the authors of this text seem willing to put aside in their focus on same-sex faithful, committed, monogamous relationships.

The context, therefore, matters. This is a topic that has been dealt with by many more distinguished writers than me elsewhere, but for now it is worth making it clear that here the question is about divorce, that divorce in this context is not necessarily the same as that in our own (for example, the role and status of women in the society of the day, which fundamentally changes our understanding of what question is actually being asked), what the purpose of the Pharisees’ question was (‘to test him’), whether the male and female element is actually the centre-piece of the response from Jesus, why this passage is found only in Matthew, and finally why marriage appears to have become so elevated in the eyes of the contemporary church that the writers of this paper ignore (until the very end, as a side note) the Pauline approach to marriage that cover it with rather less glory.

Two other elements appear to be forgotten. Firstly, we read ‘it is not good that the man should be alone’ (Genesis 2:18). Secondly, Jesus Himself states (as we do in the marriage service) ‘therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate’ (Matthew 19:6). Given that the authors of this paper recognise the good in same sex relationships, and given their dependence on Genesis as Jesus’s own understanding of marriage, it is not at all clear that we can focus solely on one part of the text and ignore the other. We know that human beings are all different – yet there remains a rather singular focus on genitals, and one tiny and insignificant chromosome, as the only difference that matters. We know that ‘male and female He created them’ is not factually accurate (as the authors note, intersex individuals exist, yet they appear to blithely move on from this point rather than engaging with it) – yet what we can say is ‘He created them, both male and female’ (giving a different emphasis to Genesis 1:27). In many ways it is where the emphasis falls that is most important in our

understanding of Genesis – and in our understanding of Jesus’s understanding of Genesis. It appears rather vainglorious to suggest we can be definitive on that by basing our entire interpretation on a question asked to test Jesus about an entirely different topic.

The ‘vital aspects of Christian witness’

Once again, we meet some unsafe logic in the discussion that follows. Those who favour same sex marriage do not do so because they believe that ‘creation is...accidental or inconsequential’, and nor do they do so out of a belief in Gnosticism (which appears to be the implied narrative). To return to ‘male and female he created them’, it appears that the authors of this paper are unaware of the scholarship that asks serious questions about whether the phrase might suggest that they were each individually made ‘both male and female’. Whether or not such an interpretation holds water, the suggestion that ‘we relate to God and each other in these two forms as male and female’ seems to be rather overstating the point. Surely, we relate to God – at the very least, and to each other as we grow in holiness – in what is ultimately human form, in the likeness of Christ, without such divisions (c.f. Galatians 3:28). There seems to be a reading in of sexed human-divine relationality in a way that offers little to our wider theological understanding, and – if I were being uncharitable – merely helps make an argument post hoc.

The section on the ‘interdependence of humanity’ once again appears to read in the importance of sexed difference in a way that is neither necessary nor particularly convincing. Once again with reference to Galatians, it is surely our interdependence one of the other, and our recognition that our differences (physical, and so on) are not of ultimate importance, that is the key to a Christian anthropology. The reference to 1 Corinthians is an example of exactly this point – that the difference between male and female has been overemphasised by the community to whom he writes. Once again, it does not require ‘the coming together of a man and a woman in marriage’ to show the need for human interdependence – cannot friendships (for example) between people of the same sex or gender also show this need? It is not at all clear, again, why ‘relations with the opposite sex’ become the key component in this argument – and it would be very interesting to discuss this in the context of monastic communities, particularly the suggestion that ‘celibate single people also need the deep intimacy of friendships with those of the other sex’! This section is confused and needs significant work to really tease out the underlying implications.

The next section refers to the ‘Story of Salvation’. Those arguing for same sex marriage would agree that ‘the coming together of difference in unity is a deep sign and picture’ of ‘intimate union’ – again, the focus on sexed differences appears to be entirely unconvincing given the wider tenor of scripture and the arguments laid so far in this paper. To restate a point, to suggest that human difference is found solely or primarily in sexual differentiation is to seriously misread not only biology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, but to surely misread the narrative of scripture as well. Similarly, it is simply absurd (and verging on the gratuitously offensive) to suggest that same sex relationships cannot include ‘difference’, ‘lifelong character’, and ‘intimacy’.

The final ‘vital aspect’ refers to the generation of new life. It is fascinating, once again, that this section appears to ignore the early Judaeo-Christian belief that sperm (hence seed) contained an entire human being (hence making abortion and masturbation of similar moral

evil, in that they both led to the death of an entire new person). Of course, the authors are entirely right that sperm and egg are required for new human life – what is missing here is any serious discussion of opposite sex marriages where there is no possibility for sperm to meet egg and implant in the uterus (for example, post menopause, post total hysterectomy, post cytotoxic chemotherapy, to name a few examples).

The argument that marriage must be open to procreation is not effectively dealt with – and this is a major weakness for the general thrust of the argument (later referred to as ‘the normatively procreative premise’ of marriage). Opening marriage to people of the same sex would not affect the dictum that ‘children should be born within marriage’, and would have no bigger impact on ‘one of the goods of marriage is procreation’ than sterile opposite sex couples. This is to say nothing of a wider understanding of the meaning of ‘procreation’ – and the paper really does say nothing on this. The authors make reference to ‘the focus on fruitfulness’ as being ‘central to its [marriage’s] character as an estate that points to the fruitfulness of the coming together of God and humanity at the marriage supper of the Lamb’. It is beyond disappointing that this fruitfulness appears to consist solely of the begetting of children in the minds of the authors of this paper – this is ultimately unimaginative and un-Biblical. The authors fail to recognise the difference between creation and *procreation* – the latter being a participation in the creative will of God.

The ‘story’ of scripture

Because of the weaknesses of the arguments offered, the suggestion that same sex marriage cannot be ‘more than a contract, a private arrangement between two individuals that helps build social cohesion’ but is actually ‘theologically much more significant’ appears to be entirely unproven. In their section on the ‘story of scripture’, the authors once again appear to be undertaking a very sexed reading of scripture, which is inevitable if the desired endpoint is opposite sex marriage as the only kind of relationship that can properly embody the Christian story. The issue, of course, is that this paper remains extraordinarily light on convincing arguments in that direction.

It is fascinating that the authors refer to the first ‘sign’ of Jesus being the ‘rescue’ of a wedding party – an almost alarmingly pedestrian understanding of the miracle at Cana! What isn’t mentioned, of course, is that there is no long discussion of the wedding itself in scripture, or of Christ’s stating that the key definition of marriage is that it is between ‘one man and one woman’, because none of that is in scripture. Instead we hear of the overflowing abundance of the generosity of God, something which might just give a good hermeneutical key to our own interpretation of the scriptural narrative.

The authors also make the following quite startling statement:

It [marriage] is also a symbolic statement that is intrinsic to the nature of the Church and its fruitfulness in bringing forth new children through rebirth by water and the Holy Spirit. In marriage, it is precisely the gendered distinction and difference that a man and a woman bring to the symbolic enactment of the Church’s destiny as the eschatological sign of consummation when God is all in all.

This is a deeply confused sentiment and exhibits very clearly the overarching hermeneutic of biblical interpretation – the scriptures are being interpreted through the lens of ‘sexed existence’ rather than the other way around. The writing here is dense and frankly rather difficult to understand, but it appears that the authors suggest that ‘gendered distinction and difference’ is required to be ‘symbolic’ of the eschatological nature of the church, a ‘symbolic statement’ that is ‘intrinsic to the nature of the Church’ (a quite outlandish statement in ecclesiological terms). Where this suggestion comes from is not at all clear, and this paragraph reads primarily as a piece of propositional reasoning rather than as a reflection on scripture as the source of theological exploration.

Perhaps the most extraordinary statement, however, comes at the end of this section:

Any change to the doctrine of marriage as a union between a man and a woman would therefore not only unravel the Scriptural story of salvation, but risk undermining our understanding of the nature of the Church as it is derived from Scripture and given to us as a revelatory sign.

We can only presume that the authors do not mean what they say here, in that they cannot possibly be suggesting that changing [sic] the doctrine of marriage would actually unravel the Scriptural story of salvation – but rather they must mean that it would unravel (in their opinion) the way that we understand scripture to speak about salvation. That rather large issue put to one side, nonetheless no evidence is provided as to why the focus must once again be on sexual difference. This – as the reader will now identify – is at heart the main issue with this paper. **The conclusions it seeks to draw only become conclusions if the premise that sexed differentiation is the key, binary scriptural and human differentiation of note in the story of salvation.** This is entirely unsupported by the reasoning in the paper, no convincing evidence is presented. The reliance on one, narrow, scripturally de-contextualized reading of Ephesians is insufficiently explained (or clearly recognised), and similarly the way that the Genesis account is handled is unconvincing from the perspective of contemporary Biblical scholarship.

Civil marriage and same-sex relations

The final section of the paper shows even more clearly that the underlying premise is unstable. It is very welcome to see – for the first time in many cases, and notably against the position of the Church of England Evangelical Council (of whom at least one author is a Council member) – those professing a non-affirming view stating that:

Same-sex relationships can, of course, be lifelong, loving, committed, faithful, and provide deep and enduring companionship. As such the church needs to find ways to recognise and welcome such relationships.

LGBTQI Christians have spent many years being told there is nothing good in their relationships – if they are, however, ‘loving, committed, faithful’, then they cannot surely be considered without merit (and hence, are open to blessing, although the authors of this paper clearly do not agree, and several voted against (and others abstained from) the proposals that are being brought to General Synod). It is likewise good to see a recognition that:

Meanwhile the Church has frequently idolised and idealised marriage as the pinnacle of human relations and the state to which to aspire above all else.

It is abundantly obvious, of course, that this statement might also be used as a valid descriptor of the paper as presented!

Conclusion

The authors of this paper suggest at the end that ‘a move towards same-sex *marriage* in church is not the way to’ ‘best provide a better welcome and radical inclusion for LGBTQI+ Christians...and to find appropriate ways to affirm the goods of same-sex relationships’. It is entirely unacceptable for a paper that argues against something to end without making even a perfunctory attempt to offer an alternative. It is probably the case that the authors cannot agree amongst themselves as to what that alternative might look like – they are united in opposition, but not proposition, and from a wide variety of theological perspectives. Indeed, the authors refer to the ‘proper concern’ about the draft prayers of Love and Faith, suggesting that not all of those who are party to this paper truly believe there are ‘goods’ in same-sex relationships given the current content of those prayers.

As I have argued throughout, this paper does not ultimately build a convincing case against opening marriage up to those of the same sex – and nor does it offer a convincing picture of the role of opposite sex marriage. It does not address ‘how [the doctrine of marriage as the Church of England has received it]’ relates ‘particularly to changes in society around same-sex relationships’ in way that does justice to the wider disciplines required to engage in any such enterprise. There may indeed be stronger arguments against equal marriage, but these need to be made with far greater clarity, and it is perhaps regrettable that by including so many diverse theological perspectives, this paper fails to exemplify a coherent narrative.

Charlie Bell *Candlemas 2023*

***Christ and His church – continued (Chapter 10 – *Sex and Marriage in Queer Holiness* (DLT 2022))**

Yet, to return specifically to relational sexuality, it is here that the dividing line has been most clearly drawn, and it is for this reason that those who oppose same-sex relational sexuality refuse to compromise. For them, belonging to a church that ‘blesses sin’ is a step too far, even if they refuse to ‘bless the sin’ themselves. A blessing can only be given to that which is good, and the corollary of their position is that these relationships do not embody good. Arguments around whether marriage is a sacrament are out of the scope of this book, but whether marriage is called a sacrament, sacramental or otherwise, at the heart of this union is something important and holy that is blessed by God, and which displays something of the being and love of God within itself. It is for this reason that it is blessed, and the out-workings of this blessing are described in some detail in the marriage services, to which we now turn.

It is these out-workings that are best able to point us towards an understanding of the nature of marriage. It is important to hold these up against the innately gendered language we associate with marriage to see whether such language is necessary. We learn that marriage is a gift of God, blessed by Christ – a gift freely given, we presume, to all (once again raising the question of how and why God would create people for whom this gift is dangled like a forbidden fruit) – and is a sign of the mystical union between Christ and His church. We are told that ‘as man and woman grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind, as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.’¹ Arguments have been put forward that force a link between the essential gendered nature of the couple and the imagery of Christ and His bride – frequently these arguments end in complementarian understandings of the married couple that emphasise the ‘different but equal’ roles of men and women. This not only ignores the basic science and rides roughshod over the complexity of human sexual difference we discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, but also takes representational, gendered difference - rather than the love of Christ for His church - as the starting point in the metaphor. The difference between Christ and His church can never be reduced to male-female binaries, and to do so cheapens and degrades a much more fundamental Biblical truth.

Indeed, these arguments appear to do serious violence to the metaphor employed – it is both heterosexualist and patriarchal to assume that the man must take the role of Christ and the wife the role of the Church, yet this has far too often been used as an argument for the essentially gendered nature of marriage. A more sensitive and careful reading must surely alert us to the fact that neither partner in a marriage can ever truly represent Christ, but instead the metaphor works when we speak of the dynamic, growing, and deepening relationship between the couple as portraying and embodying in a bidirectional way the kind of love that unites Christ and his Church. It is here that they ‘give themselves to each other in love throughout their lives’ so they are ‘united in that love as Christ is united with his Church’. The gendered aspects come through reading this passage in the light of cultural preconceptions – the metaphor is weakened and impoverished, and the beauty of the marital relationship cheapened.

Indeed, one of the key elements of the relationship modelled – between Christ and His Church – is faithfulness. This faithfulness is not gendered, and nor does it solely relate to the sexual element of any relationship. It appears to cheapen the metaphor, therefore, to relate it to a gendered understanding where no such understanding is necessary. Faithfulness, one to the other, embraces the entire relationship and is one of the elements mentioned in the marriage service and most clearly seen in wider understandings of the marriage covenant. It is faithfulness between two people that is blessed and is a visible sign of God’s working in and through a marriage, and it is simply untenable to suggest that faithfulness – and specifically that faithfulness exemplified in a marriage – can only be fully found in the relationship of two people of the opposite sex.

¹ The imagery of ‘heart, body and mind’ and the becoming of ‘one flesh’ is a metaphor that points to both the love of God for the church, and also the creation narratives found in the early chapters of Genesis (hence marriage is sometimes described as a ‘creation ordinance’) – a key example of this is found in the Book of

Common Prayer which described marriage as (in part) ‘an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church’. Unless we are to take these chapters as literal historical fact (which is a vanishingly rare position to hold), then it is important that we do the work to interrogate and determine whether we are excluding marriage for same sex couples because it is genuinely incompatible with Genesis’s theological narrative, or whether same sex relationships are simply not present as a contextual (rather than ontological) possibility in the minds of the writers. If we recognise that Genesis is an account that speaks of creation in a theological way, rather than a historical document, and that marriage *per se* is not mentioned in Genesis – but rather a form of relational sexuality is (as described in this chapter) – then we cannot easily disregard the possibility that this narrative might provide insights for same sex relational sexuality as well. Returning to the fact that marriage underwent a number of developments through Jewish and Christian history, and that the ‘becoming one flesh’ is most fully seen in the love of Christ for the church, it would appear that there has not been a static understanding of the relationship between the Genesis ‘creation ordinance’ and human relationships, and that a determination to focus on the gender of the couple rather than the underlying theological truth it is trying to portray may itself be a dead end. An exploration of the context of Genesis – and its importance for interpretation – is found in Warner, M., “Therefore a Man Leaves His Father and His Mother and Clings to His Wife”: Marriage and Intermarriage in Genesis 2:24 *JBL* (2017) 136 (2): 269-288.