

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE BLESSING OF SAME-GENDER MARRIAGES BY THE CHURCH

by Terry Anderson¹

While the presenting issue before us is same-sex marriage, the underlying issues are much broader, entailing beliefs regarding the meaning and purpose of human sexuality and the basis or authoritative sources for such beliefs. These beliefs in turn shape both our understanding of marriage and the moral standards by which we seek to guide, govern, and assess all our sexual behaviour.

The question before us, then, places into dispute the vitally important beliefs concerning what God calls each one of us to be and do regarding the sexual dimension of life. What belongs to the new life into which Christ raises us, as we say in the sacrament of Baptism, and what belongs to the old life to which we die? To what authoritative sources we appeal, how we interpret them, especially scripture, and our line of reasoning, will in turn shape how we determine other matters of discipleship in an ever-changing culture.

Much is at stake, therefore, in terms of basic Christian doctrine and practices in answering the question before us. To say “yes”, and decide to bless and sanction same-sex unions as marriages in Christ’s name, bears a heavy burden of proof. It involves a radical change in basic beliefs and moral standards themselves, and not merely a different application of traditional Christian ones. In addition, the proposed change entails not only a one hundred and eighty degree shift in the assessment of

¹ As a member of University Hill United Church, Vancouver, Terry Anderson presented this statement in March, 2007, as a contribution to the discussion on “Should we as a congregation bless in the name of Jesus Christ the union of same-sex couples, declaring and sanctioning them as marriages in Christ?”

particular actions by individuals (from wrong and contrary to God's will, to right and good in God's sight) but the sanctioning of a general practice with far-reaching effects for future generations, particularly in the way children are begotten and raised. And all of this is to be done in the name of Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour. Also at issue, therefore, is obedience to the third commandment against misusing the name of God.

It is as elders and trustees of the Gospel handed down to us that we make this decision on behalf of the congregation, and not simply for ourselves as individuals. The responsibility is awesome. Thankfully, the question before us does not involve any challenge to Christian belief concerning God's mercy and forgiveness which is extended to all in Jesus Christ. Nor does it challenge our beliefs about the worth God bestows on every human life, nor place in doubt the fact that God works for good in wonderful, mysterious ways through even imperfect and sinful creatures like ourselves.

As forgiven sinners, then, let us engage in this dispute with deep gratitude for God's love freely given, and not with anxious striving to win that love nor to prove ourselves. We must first seek diligently to identify, and then to follow, Christ's Way of true life, and not to confuse it with the way of the fallen world from which we are called to turn away. Have we adequately prepared ourselves as a Council, living with the question in prayer, study, and sitting under the Word in scripture?

I BELIEVE THAT THE ANSWER TO THE
QUESTION BEFORE US SHOULD BE "NO."

I WILL VOTE ACCORDINGLY FOR THE
FOLLOWING REASONS:

I believe, first, that to bless same-sex unions in Christ's name as marriages in Christ would be an unfaithful witness to God's Word and Way. Secondly, I believe it would not be for the true good of our neighbours, and thus contrary to God's command to love our neighbour.

A. Faithful Witness to God's Word and Way

1) God's purpose and intent for human sexuality in this earthly life, grounded in his creation of human life as male and female, is basically the mysterious one flesh union of man and woman (equal and complementary), accompanied by the vocation to procreate and parent children, thereby assuring the continuance of the human race. For some, infertility, age, or special circumstances may of necessity modify this vocation in various ways without abandoning it.

The male-female "one flesh" purpose is stated explicitly in Genesis, and cited by Jesus as the basis for his teaching on marriage and divorce. This understanding of God's purpose for human sexuality is pervasive throughout scripture and the Christian tradition. Indeed, I know of no "counter testimonies" in Scripture regarding this purpose. Nor can I find credible grounds for abandoning this understanding of the core meaning of marriage.

Same-sex unions are intrinsically (by their very nature) not in accord with this intent and purpose. To sanction such unions in Christ's name is in effect using his name to endorse and bear witness to a very different truth claim (albeit one taken for granted by much of our society) along the lines that human sexuality is simply a pleasurable form of self-expression and a vehicle for intimate bonding between any (two?) persons.

2) Marriage is a human institution that in some form or another appears to be universal to humankind, not invented by Church or State — though they may endorse and seek to regulate it. The core of this universal human phenomenon in all its various forms is the union of man and woman and the hope of procreation. This is true even in societies where same-sex unions have been openly practised and accepted. The Bible itself records a variety of marriage forms and human uses and misuses of the institution, but the core meaning of marriage remains constant, one rooted in God's creation and His purpose for human sexuality. The

trajectory in Scripture is towards a life-long, monogamous form of marriage. In the Christian tradition, marriage so understood is seen as an “estate” or “order”, ordained by God as a gift for helping to preserve and sustain humankind and creation, which in its fallen condition is constantly threatened by chaos and destruction. Christians may serve God and other humans by honouring this holy estate by entering into it in a way that accords with God’s Word and command (“one man, one woman, exclusive, for life”. Luther).

I can find no credible grounds in Scripture, Christian tradition, reason, or experience, for attempting, in God’s name, to change the core meaning of this holy ordinance of marriage into simply a contract, or at best a covenant, between any (two?) consenting persons (sexually exclusive? for life?).

B. Love of Neighbour

In light of these convictions, I believe that the proposed change would not be for the true well-being of our neighbours.

1) The “neighbours” with no voice in this matter, the least powerful and the most vulnerable, are children and youth, present and future. To bear false witness concerning God’s purpose for human sexuality as we teach and engage in the spiritual and moral formation of the young is not truly to love or care for them as God would have us do.

More particularly, what about the well-being of children connected to same-sex couples? It is well documented that children with only a mother or only a father are seriously disadvantaged. Much effort is spent to avoid that happening, or when such efforts fail, to overcome such conditions. I cannot believe that it is responsible care for children yet not born to deliberately establish in Christ’s name same-sex unions that are unable to provide any children they may parent with both a mother and a father.

2) Of course, another set of neighbours deeply affected by this decision, and whose well-being we must seek, are those with a homosexual orientation. But once again, we must remember the full orb'd love that Jesus teaches, exemplifies, and to which he calls us. I believe that it is not in accord with such love to encourage, teach, counsel, sanction, and celebrate a way of sexual expression and an understanding of marriage that contradicts God's intent and purpose. Rather to do such is to help lead others astray, and not in their true best interest. In addition, studies reveal that even monogamous same-sex unions entail a significantly higher risk of medical problems and break-up.

I would hope that instead we would witness in our words and actions to God's wonderful, merciful love toward us all, regardless of our sexual desires or predilections. We all fall short of God's will in these matters and struggle with wayward desires, asking for God's forgiveness and for strength to turn to God's way of life. I hope that at the same time we would witness in our words and actions to God's wonderful, empowering, transforming love that calls and enables us to enter a new life where one's identity is not centered on one's sexual desires, but on discipleship to Christ. Accordingly, we should support each other in every way possible to discern and follow, by the power of the Holy Spirit, a faithful path in matters of sex as well as all other aspects of life. I think, for example, of persons with a homosexual orientation who seek with considerable success to change the direction of their desires, of others who live in chaste singleness but with rich friendships. Such singleness (whatever one's orientation) is lifted up especially in the New Testament as a faithful vocation. This path can be and actually is in some churches a wonderful witness to loving friendships and a corrective to the danger of making sex and even marriage into idols.

3) There is, of course, the well-being of many other neighbours to consider since the proposed changes in beliefs and practices

will in the long term affect us all. As nations have almost universally recognized, strong marriages and healthy families are essential to the well-being, even survival of any society. They affect directly or indirectly nearly every aspect of society. Promoting a new thin, impoverished understanding of marriage, and assisting in institutionalizing as normative practice (rather than regrettable and hopefully, exceptional necessity) the denying of some children either a mother or a father is hardly for the common good. And have we as elders really considered the new complex ethical challenges of technological reproduction toward which the proposed changes would lead?

The well-being of our congregation is a key responsibility for us as elders. Obviously, if as I believe, the proposed changes to our marriage policy would be a false witness, then to adopt them would not be good for the congregation, even though it might be more popular to “go with the current cultural flow”.

Of particular concern is that such a change in policy would take us in a direction away from the “holy catholic” or world-wide church.

Conclusion

In the name of love of God and neighbour, therefore, I must vote against the proposed radical changing of a marriage policy that is rooted in Scripture and upheld by the experience, teaching, and testimony, of Christians in many different traditions, cultures and contexts throughout the centuries.

Editor’s Note: On November 4, 2007, the Council and the congregation of University Hill Church affirmed the question that had been before them for discussion and debate. Terry and his wife Daphne felt that in all conscience they could not remain as members. They wrote the congregation the following letter, dated January 1, 2008.

Dear friends in Christ:

This seems an appropriate day for us finally to write to you about our decision that, in light of the Nov. 4, 2007 marriage policy statement adopted by the congregation and the Council, we must now go to live and work with another branch of the Christian family.

The two months it has taken us to write this letter is an indication of the grief we feel, and the difficulty we have had knowing what faithful obedience to Christ means for us in this situation. It has involved us in much prayer, soul searching and consultation with trusted friends.

The journey of the Council and congregation to the new policy decision has been a long, weary, and often wrenching one, which began in January, 2004 when the Adult Faith Formation committee was asked by the Council of Elders to initiate a program which would help prepare the congregation to make a decision regarding same sex marriage.

How many times we have all wished we could be shed of the responsibility of trying to make such a decision, knowing it would inevitably cause division and turmoil in the congregation. Looking back, we think that the Council adopted a responsible process to help prepare us to make a faithful decision. Alas, we on Council failed to ensure that it was fully followed or completed, especially in regard to the examination of Scripture and building on the earlier study of Christian marriage. Thus it was a decision that all of us, from committee to Council to congregation, were ill prepared to make.

We cannot rehearse all that we have said and written previously as to why we believe that the adoption of such a policy statement initiating a new marriage practice is not in accord with God's will and Christ's mission. However, we feel constrained to state again what is so disturbing about it that would cause us to feel compelled to serve elsewhere.

Such a policy and practice necessitates a radical change in underlying beliefs regarding God's purpose for human sexuality, the meaning of marriage, and thereby also, the vision that we proclaim and to which we aspire for this major dimension of our lives. It also affects the moral standards by which we attempt, however falteringly, to guide our conduct. Such changes in turn have profound implications, some of which have already surfaced, for the procreation and parenting of children and family life. These are well documented by psychological and sociological studies. And of course, as is well known and researched, any negative impacts on marriage, child rearing and family affect the whole of society, especially in regard to health, poverty, and even crime. Thus if you believe as we do that the changes in underlying beliefs are not in accord with God's will, it is no minor disagreement that can be set aside in the name of unity and accord.

These very significant changes are part of strong cultural currents that were well underway in society and in some churches long before the issue of same-sex marriage even emerged. Indeed for some, they now seem commonplace. However, these underlying beliefs and moral standards are very different from (indeed we believe contrary to) what the Christian tradition and the present ecumenical, holy catholic church holds to be the testimony of Scripture regarding God's purpose for our sexuality. We have struggled against these cultural currents throughout our entire ministry, even as our denomination was gradually adjusting its beliefs to be in line with them.

We had hoped also that our congregation would have a ministry to and with homosexual persons, reaching out especially to those who feel rejected, lost and alone. But we believe that true Christian love and ministry to any and all alike must witness both to God's great and merciful love to us all and at the same time to God's transforming love. This love does not merely indulge, let alone endorse, our present desires and actions but

calls and enables us all to begin new, transformed lives in the Spirit that are in accord with God's revealed purposes. We hoped, then, that our Council and congregation, as part of Christ's mission, would maintain a witness to the biblical beliefs concerning human sexuality and marriage as an important dimension of that new life and Way.

We recognize that the change in beliefs and standards entailed in the newly adopted policy and practice, though radical and far-reaching, will probably not become very apparent in the life of the congregation for a while. This is especially likely if the new policy is treated with a kind of "benign neglect" rather than a more rigorous pursuit of its full implementation for proclamation, teaching and formation.

Nevertheless, the decision has committed the congregation, including all its best qualities, to a different direction, one with many long-range implications. It has raised up, as it were, a new banner proclaiming a different vision for sexuality and marriage even though the accompanying trumpet may not yet be loudly sounded, in deference to the many who voted against the change.

It is a direction we cannot in good faith travel, a banner under which we, in good conscience, cannot serve, a proclamation we cannot support. We give thanks to God for our many blessed years with University Hill congregation, for the hope and excitement of biblical renewal and the joy of rediscovering Christ's mission. We leave not in anger but in disappointment and deep sorrow over the loss of so much that has been central to our lives. We humbly pray that we have heard aright God's will for us. We hope that our friendships will continue. You all will certainly continue to be in our prayers. We ask for yours.

May God in Jesus Christ have mercy upon us, and we pray that somehow, by God's mysterious grace, the different paths of his scattered family may one day be reunited.

— Daphne and Terry Anderson