

AN ARGUMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE BLESSING OF SAME-GENDER MARRIAGES BY THE CHURCH

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It is on the question of “marriage” where I hope to focus. I will take two things as starting points that I will not attempt to argue, which is not to say they are obvious or acceptable to all, but they are acceptable to me and, for one reason or another, I believe, are “givens” in our conversation about marriage. First, our civil society sanctions gay marriage; it is now a civil right. What follows does not depend upon this assumption to any significant degree but it is worth noting, for it forms an important part of the context in which we hold this conversation. Second, I accept, as does the United Church, that gay orientation is a reality and is acceptable in the church, and that gay sexual expression is not a sin in and of itself. Like heterosexual sexual expression, it may be a sin in some expressions and it may not in others.

So you do not have to search through this essay to find where I finally come out on the question of whether our congregation should bless same-gender marriages. I will simply declare now that I believe we should, on the same basis as we would bless heterosexual marriages.

That said, I have been unhappy with the way the United Church has dealt with this question, which has contributed to my reluctance to become involved in it. I have tried to avoid it, knowing that people I hugely respect have a differing viewpoint, knowing that people who have been kind and welcoming to me

² This is a paper prepared in March, 2007 by Douglas Goodwin, a member of University Hill United Church, Vancouver, 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?”

as a stranger in this congregation may feel betrayed, and knowing that some may leave this fellowship. I also recognized that I had not done my homework, and read the articles, and sat under the scripture enough. And, truthfully, although I am happy with the freedom in the United Church to bless same-sex marriages, few of the statements of our church on the matter ever seem to be peculiarly Christian.

For instance, at the General Council meeting in 2003, that we point to as the time when the United Church declared same-gender marriage as acceptable in the United Church, the motion passed was, in fact, an appeal to the federal government to make provision in federal legislation for same-gender marriage. We did not say anything about our view of Christian marriage. It may be that the two — civil marriage and Christian marriage — are so closely related in United Church minds that no one saw that there may be differences and that, perhaps, it might have been incumbent for the church to talk about and change itself before it asked the rest of Canada to change. But we did not. We did our small part helping change Canadian law, and then fell into place. Perhaps because our church began by engaging a civil matter rather than a church issue, there has been a dearth of theological or biblical conversation about this matter. That may have been understandable earlier when the church felt it important to influence government opinion, but the fact that it is still virtually absent is disturbing. Even though some may not be very happy with its quality, there was far more biblical conversation in the debates leading to the decision in 1988 to allow the ordination of gay persons than there has been these past few years.

I note that many congregations across the country have quickly and easily embraced gay marriage. I have heard some proudly declare that they did not even have to talk about it; they just voted and everyone agreed. I wonder how and why this is so. An optimist might conclude that in the years since 1988 the United Church has grappled so thoroughly and faithfully with the

issues of gay orientation and marriage, resulting in the transformation of our Christian character, that we now view gay marriage as “common sense”. I think there is an element of truth to this. The understanding and acceptance of gay persons and gay relationships has increased significantly in the past two decades. But I also fear that part of the reason for not engaging scripture, tradition, and theology on this issue in any major way is because those things do not matter much to us any more. They pale in comparison to the “real” issues that our society identifies as significant — diversity, human rights, sexual expression as a matter solely for autonomous individuals and their consciences.

Making a decision too quickly and easily seems to me to be a lack of respect for how important this question is, something both proponents and opponents of same-gender marriage would want to affirm.

Gospel Conversation

Since, as I mentioned above, I end up agreeing that the church should bless same-gender marriages in the same way it does heterosexual ones, some might wonder why I am unhappy with the church. It is not simply intellectual arrogance: “the church did not think hard enough about this matter... but I have!” Instead, I believe that the one gift the church offers to our world is not our “right answers”, or our good practices, or our progressive ideals. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the gospel does not dominate our conversations, when we are not using our language and “figures” and stories, when we are not rummaging through the scriptures and arguing over their interpretation, when we are not quoting our forbears in the faith at least a little bit, when we are not singing hymns and offering prayers, then we are forgetting the one gift we have to offer. We are neglecting our witness. There are many people and faiths and ideologies in the world that can produce arguments equally as good or better than we can about justice and love and human

rights. Many of them are far better than we are at living them, too. When we echo their arguments we are simply that — an echo — or just one more interest group. All we as Christians have to offer the world is the gospel, and when we do not offer it we are abandoning what we understand to be God’s strategy of salvation: “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe” (I Cor.1:21).

Christians cannot help but talk the language of their surrounding culture, but when we are deliberating as Christians, we should at least try — and try hard — to be bilingual, and to ensure that the language of “gospel” — of scripture, theology, tradition, and worship — is as present and influential as possible.

That is why I am so proud to be part of University Hill at this time. This congregation is trying to engage a major issue in a significantly Christian way, with as much Christian conversation and prayer as we can muster in the midst of a non-Christian culture. I think we will very likely end up with disagreement about what the outcome should look like, but I am confident we shall disagree as Christians, as so many Christians before us have disagreed with one another... and I would rather disagree as Christians, as hard as that may be, than to live together in peace because we simply bought into or rejected the prevailing Canadian point of view.

Framing the Question

The trouble with people like me who have gone to university is that we have a hard time getting to the heart of the matter, in this case, the Bible and theology. But I think it may be helpful next to ask how the question before us about blessing same-gender marriage should be framed. In particular, it would be helpful to frame the question in such a way that those on one side of the question or the other are not demonized.

For instance, most commonly in the United Church the question is framed as a “human rights” question. It is a violation

of “human rights” not to marry same-gender couples. By framing it in this manner the “answer” to the question is automatically given. By definition, human rights are non-negotiable, self-evident, inalienable — an unqualified “good”. Those who oppose gay marriage oppose human rights and are equated with others who do so, like racists, misogynists, tyrants, or, if the accuser is kind, simply reactionaries. This seems grossly unfair, especially since this “human right”, which should be self-evident to all, was not talked about as a “right”, or even a realistic possibility, less than a decade ago. Recognizing gay marriage as a “human right” might be the result of a long and protracted discussion (a “conclusion”), but it cannot be the starting point (the “pre-judgement”).

The same is true if framed as a “justice” issue. With “justice” as the governing principle those who oppose gay marriage must be considered as people who promote injustice. And if it is, indeed, a justice issue (“we need to do this because it is just and right”) then it is extremely hard to understand why the United Church would tolerate congregations who do not marry gay partners, for that would be tolerating injustice.

Often gay marriage is accepted because it is “inclusive”. This is understandable, because “inclusivity” has become a very high value for the United Church, and it would be expected that important decisions reflect it. In fact, for many it has become the one defining characteristic of the United Church that makes us distinct from other churches (which, presumably, are “exclusive”). I believe the idea of “including” others is a valuable one. But “inclusivity” as an ideology, as a governing noun rather than an important verb, is troubling, partly because it is impossible. As long as people in this world are different and disagree, as long as there are class and language differences, including some will always mean excluding others. “Including” gay marriage will mean “excluding” a large part of the world church. There may be good reasons to do so, but not in the name

of “inclusivity”. Perhaps more importantly, there will always be behaviours and, sometimes, individuals we will want to “exclude” from our fellowship within the rubric of discipline. “Including” may be something we will want to do most of the time with most of those we meet, but, again, this should be a conclusion after deliberation, not an ideology that predetermines all cases.

Gay marriage is often promoted because it “welcomes” others. Like inclusivity, “welcome” is a good thing, but when it takes precedence over all other values and considerations it not only becomes unwieldy (what happens if welcoming some makes others feel unwelcome? how can we judge “welcome” except statistically, by counting individual reactions and, presumably, striving to meet individual preferences?) but it overshadows values and practices that the church might also want to promote, like “deny yourself and take up the cross”, discipleship, tithing, and the like.

One of the ways those who oppose gay marriage sometimes frame the question is “it is part of the slippery slope”. This way of framing the question seems to me not only to be unhelpful, but far too often insulting in how it links present gay relationships with clearly unacceptable practices further down “the slope”. It is true that often one action makes a future one easier. Almost all moral decisions find themselves situated somewhere on a “slope”. The proverbial Baptist prohibition against dancing was a recognition (an accurate recognition, I have concluded) that dancing makes future sexual activity more likely. However, many factors and decisions might well intervene before anything down the “slope” actually takes place. There may be compelling reasons why it should not, or it may simply not have the momentum to continue (i.e., the anticipated problem never arises). Rarely can the “slippery slope” argument be used authoritatively except in retrospect.

If not framed in any of the ways above, how might the question be framed? I believe the question before us might be framed something like the following: what is our Christian witness regarding marriage in this time?

This framing does not presuppose an answer. Faithful Christians can find themselves responding with different answers. It recognizes that our decision is not the ultimate truth for all time but is our present witness to what we know of God and God's love in Jesus Christ. Some may even be able to view it as a provisional decision, because as "witness" it is a word to our world and ought to address the present realities of our world.

It is also a matter of debate, argument, disagreement, and, perhaps, even separation, but it does not demonize, or declare unchristian, those who come to different conclusions. As Walter Brueggemann has convincingly pointed out, even our scriptures provide different "witness" or "testimony" depending upon a host of factors, including the location of the faithful community in the social world around it. We can be biblical people, yet still provide differing witness. The question then becomes, as Terry Anderson pointed out at one Tuesday evening session, how do we love those whom we think are wrong, and with whom we disagree? After the question about marriage has been decided (and even before), Terry's question needs our full attention.

The Scriptures

As I noted far above, "I accept, as does the United Church, that gay orientation is a reality and is acceptable in the church, and that gay sexual expression is not a sin in and of itself." I will not deal directly with scriptural passages that mention homosexual activity, therefore. I recognize that making a biblical case for this conclusion is difficult and not self-evident, but others can argue it far better than I. I will focus on texts that speak about marriage, or throw light on how we might think about marriage.

The primary text that those who see Christian marriage as appropriate only between the two genders, female and male, is Gen. 2: 23-24. It is significant not only in itself but also because it is quoted favourably by Jesus (Mt.19:5; Mk 10: 6-8) and by Paul (I Cor. 6:16; Eph 5:31). (Interestingly, Luke does not include this saying of Jesus, although most scholars would claim that he knew of it through Mark.)

Genesis 2: 21-24 is a powerful story of how closely connected the two genders are, one arising very physically from the other, female out of male. Interestingly, the story is the opposite of fertility cults, which proclaimed the obvious fact that males “come out of” females. Clearly in Genesis, this creation of female and male is not a natural act but one that happens solely by the grace of God, or in Genesis 1, by the creative word of God. The implication of Genesis 2 is that men and women come together sexually because they are actually, from the beginning of creation, one. Marriage is understood in verse 24 as deriving from the re-joining of what was originally one.

Jesus connects this text to marriage in the parallel texts in Matthew and Mark when arguing that divorce should not be permitted: the coming together of men and women in marriage creates a relationship that should not be divisible — they are “one flesh”. These passages have been used by the church to sanction marriage (and oppose divorce) through the ages. But do they necessarily preclude same-gender marriage? Most in the world church would say they do. Certainly using these texts liturgically in a same-gender marriage ceremony would be confusing.

Those who claim that these texts exclude same-gender marriages argue that they establish or reveal the proper order of things, the way God created the world and intends humanity to live within it. Some order, or God-given structure, within creation has been established called “marriage”, and it is reflected or described in this story; it is our Christian

responsibility to recognize this order of creation, to follow and obey it. At times the argument seems to imply that marriage between a man and woman, where they become one flesh again, is written into the structure of creation: it simply “is”.

Genesis 2, in other words, is seen as establishing marriage as an institution that is grounded in creation itself, an institution with quite clear characteristics, including the necessity of being composed of a male and a female. The failure to comply with the structure of this order would not only be sinful but would in some manner violate the very nature of creation.

This is a powerful biblical argument. I am not convinced, however, that it should carry the power that it does for some, or that it carry the weight of establishing such an institution. Genesis 2 is a mythological (in the best sense of the word) story of the forming of a woman by dividing the flesh of a human being. The purpose of this creation of a new being is not procreation but because, in the words of God, “it is not good for ‘Man’ to be alone; I will provide a partner for him.” In the imaginative language of poetry the text points to how the attraction and connection of men and women to each other is part of the good creation of God, as powerful as the longing of flesh for its own self, the rejoining of what had been divided. The story is a celebration of this intimate relationship, this eros, between the genders. Marriage is not the climax of the story, but is mentioned almost tangentially as a reflection on the story by the narrator. The story of one flesh dividing to become male and female is a powerful metaphor to help understand the observable relationship between a woman and a man, but to claim it establishes marriage as an order of creation that takes this, and only this form, seems to be demanding far too much of the story.

Jesus’ use of the story in Matthew and Mark seems to draw on it in a similar way. Jesus wishes to discourage or, perhaps, forbid divorce; Genesis 2 provides a powerful image why a

marriage should not be dissolved. Like a rabbi, he quotes from scripture in order to make an authoritative point that the original text was not necessarily trying to make, just as he does elsewhere (Mt. 22: 29-33, 41-46). Jesus was not drawing from an understanding of marriage as an order of creation, but was using scripture in order to make an authoritative point. In other words, Jesus was not relying upon an ontology of marriage revealed in Genesis, but was backing up an argument about divorce with scriptural authority.

In fact, Jesus (or the church of Matthew?) reduces the power of the “one flesh” image when Jesus says (Mt 19:9) “whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” Marriage is becoming one flesh...but not quite. Marriage already in the words of Jesus/Matthew is viewed as somewhat more flexible than those who wish to see it as an order of creation would prefer.

Although the biblical witness is varied, much of it, especially in the New Testament, works against the perception of marriage as a firm, clearly defined, institution. In the book of Hosea, the prophet plays in a free way with the institution of marriage. Hosea forms, then re-forms, his marriage, not based upon the way the institution of marriage would suggest but as a visible sign of God’s dealings with Israel. Marriage is structured not on an order of creation but upon God’s present and demanding word.

In Ezra 9-10 those who have married “foreign” women are commanded to divorce them. Again, marriage is not understood in any way as an order of creation but is viewed as a political and religious act which might be annulled for political or religious reasons.

Jesus was unmarried, unusual for a Jewish male and probably quite intentional, as a visible witness that marriage does not hold a prominent place. Paul, too, seems to have been unmarried (I Cor. 7:7), likely for the same reason. I Corinthians 7

is central to a Christian understanding of marriage. In it Paul promotes singleness as a Christian ideal: “he who marries does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (7:38). In fact, throughout chapter 7 it is clear that marriage is not something grounded in creation but, while a good thing, is passing away: “the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none” (vs 29). Paul is even easy on divorce: “if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you” (vs 15). Divorce is not to be actively pursued (vss 12-13) but it is not to be resisted if requested either. Interestingly, the reason Paul gives for not divorcing is not because “the two have become one” or because the institution of marriage demands the couple stay together, but as an act of evangelism toward the spouse and children (vss 14-16).

It seems that Paul, particularly in I Corinthians 7, is basing his view on marriage not on the establishment of marriage in Genesis 2 but on the promised future of God which, he and the church believed, was coming very soon. Marriage was to be related to the coming eschatological reality, not to the creation reality.

In Jesus’ debate with the Sadducees about resurrection he reflects the same attitude about marriage. In Matthew 22:23-30 Jesus responds to their sarcastic question about the fate of the woman who had seven husbands when she arrives in heaven: whose wife would she be? Jesus responds that by asking such a question they do not know the scriptures or the power of God, “for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage”. Marriage is not part of our future in the Kingdom of God.

In fact, with Jesus many of the expected familial institutions and orders of the world find their end. In Matthew 12: 48-50 he asks, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? And

pointing to the disciples he said, Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” This new eschatological reality became central to the church’s understanding of itself as breaking down the old, family structure and establishing the family of the church (Luke 12: 51-53). E.P. Sanders argues that the one thing we know for sure about Jesus is that he said, “let the dead bury the dead”, a phrase intended to devastate — or at least challenge — the existing familial and social obligation structures of his day and place.

The importance of procreation, or at least its possibility, in a marriage has often been stressed in arguing against same-gender marriages. However, the scriptures have numerous stories of childless couples; in none is the marriage itself ever challenged. The threat is not to the marriage or its integrity but to the continuation of the family name. Mary conceived Jesus before marriage, and while this was certainly not intended to legitimize procreation outside of marriage it does remind the Christian community that God’s ways of salvation do not necessarily follow the usual expectations.

Why go through these biblical texts about marriage? I do so in order to demonstrate that it is a faithful Christian view of marriage to see it as multi-faceted, malleable to a significant degree, pushing in the direction of the new future God is bringing, and not based solely on Genesis 2. Marriage is not an institution given in creation that we necessarily need to imitate carefully so that we might keep order in the world, but is a gift from God that receives its shape and character based upon God’s present purpose and call into the new realm of God’s coming kingdom.

The Bible itself also provides good examples of how clear witness in one context does not necessarily mean it must remain unchangeable. Already noted is how Jesus’ unconditional prohibition of divorce in Mark 10:6-8 becomes more flexible in

Matthew 19:9, and is not even mentioned in I Corinthians 7. In the times of Isaiah and Micah the clear word of God was to “beat swords into ploughshares” (Is. 2: 4; Micah 4:3), but Joel turns this central scriptural demand upside down by demanding that “ploughshares be beaten into swords” (Joel 3:6). In Deuteronomy 23:1-8 eunuchs, Ammonites and Moabites are forbidden entry to “the assembly of the Lord”, but clearly knowing the Deuteronomy text, Isaiah writes, “Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” In Acts 8 this trajectory continues when a black, African eunuch becomes the first “foreigner” baptized by the nascent church. The scriptures witness that the scriptural witness is often changing.

John Calvin

While it would be helpful to do a more thorough theological overview, time constraints meant that I could only do what any good Presbyterian would do — check with John Calvin. Calvin is not a bad choice — if only a few of our theological ancestors could be consulted — since Calvinism is one of the major theological streams that have made up the United Church, and because it is well known as being very biblically attentive. Calvin wrote about marriage in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in the midst of polemics against Catholicism. His language, at times, is extreme, and he, of course, did not address the question of same-gender marriage. I suspect he would have been horrified to think of it, as would have his contemporaries.

His views on marriage, nevertheless, are interesting in this conversation. When arguing that marriage should not be

considered a sacrament, he wrote: “it [marriage] is a good and holy ordinance of God. And agriculture, architecture, shoemaking, and shaving are lawful ordinances of God; but they are not sacraments.” Clearly, marriage does not, for Calvin, hold the status of an institution grounded in creation. It is a good thing, but it is not central to God’s ways with the world. When exegeting Ephesians 5:28-31, which quotes Genesis 2, Calvin again refuses to see marriage as anything more than a “similitude” of the “spiritual marriage of Christ and the Church”. To see it as anything more is “to confound heaven and earth”, and “any man who would class such similitudes with sacraments should be sent to bedlam.”

With Paul (I Cor. 7: 9), Calvin sees marriage as valuable for those “who burn with passion”. In a sense, it is grace in the form of law, an institution established in order to deal with and control the uncontrollable effects of sin. “Natural feeling and the passion inflamed by the fall make the marriage tie doubly necessary.” It is so valuable in this regard that he writes, “If he has not the power of subduing his passion, let him understand that the Lord has made it obligatory on him to marry.” Marriage is a “remedy” to uncontrollable passions. It is the relationship provided by God where those who were not gifted with virginity and self-restraint could nevertheless be “chaste”. So important is marriage as a means of properly channeling passions that Calvin, referring to I Timothy 4:3, declares that “the prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils”.

Reflections

The foregoing observations about scripture and John Calvin do not offer a convincing argument for same-gender marriages. My goal is more modest: simply to ask if there is room in the Christian understanding of marriage to allow same-gender relationships. The “burden of proof” for my reflections is not “do the scriptures establish same-gender marriage?” but “do the

scriptures prohibit same-gender marriage?” I believe this is a faithful burden of proof, one used by Christians for many of the important social changes we have witnessed over the generations, such as adopting the abolition of slavery, the ordination of women, democracy, and the like. The burden of proof for these things and many more is not “do the scriptures demand them?” but “do the scriptures allow them”, and, for some, even lend support to them? I believe that the observations on the scriptures above show that marriage as an enduring, unchanging “order of creation” is not the sole, or even primary, witness of scripture, and that even a strongly biblical tradition like Calvinism does not define marriage based on Genesis 2 and the story of one flesh dividing into two, to be reunited again in marriage. Nor is marriage usually understood in an inseparable relationship to the procreation of children.

Indeed, marriage is usually defined and practised based upon the active, context-sensitive call of God. For Christians, this context is primarily the “in-between time”, as we wait for the coming of God’s kingdom. Marriage, therefore, begins to anticipate the coming kingdom while also being fully aware of the persistence of the present life, including the presence of sin. In anticipating God’s future, marriage is to reflect the faithfulness of God to the church (Eph. 5). As a part of the present world, marriage is a faithful discipline through which sin can be curbed and natural desires expressed justly (I Cor. 7: 8-9).

Is it possible to adapt the traditional understanding of Christian marriage to include same-gender couples, yet still honour this “in-between times” practice of marriage as Christian witness and discipline? I believe it can. In fact, once it has been accepted that gay sexual expression is not a sin in and of itself, I believe that same-gender marriage is an important next step for the church.

Marriage has long been viewed by the church as a reflection of, and a testimony to, the faithful love of God to the Church.

(On the other hand, adultery and fornication have often been used as synonyms for turning away from God in apostasy, disobedience or idolatry.) Christians who wish their personal relationships to reflect the kind of love that God has shown to the world will find marriage to be a most appropriate and evangelistic institution to enter. For it is in marriage where a couple commit themselves in the church body to love and honour until death, even when love does not come easily. As a community practice, the couple is held accountable to the body of Christ for their relationship.

Christians also see marriage as where couples can freely express themselves sexually in a relationship that is committed, safe, and responsible, where the possibility of exploitation is guarded against. While a wonderful gift of God, sex also carries with it the possibility of sin or, in the softer words of a 1980s United Church report, “dilemma”. Our propensity to seek our own gratification at the expense of others (sin) needs to be guarded by public disciplines and safeguards such as found in the institution of marriage. While expectation that all sexual expression will only be found in marriage is almost non-existent in our church, there is still the recognition that marriage best carries the values and models of appropriate sexual behaviour. As sanctioned and recognized by the church, it also exists under the public eye and, at times, scrutiny of others. Giving oneself to another in marriage is giving over the total freedom of one’s sexual expression to the partner, but it is also inviting the community to help “keep watch” of the relationship (beginning by being “witnesses” at the marriage ceremony), in a fair, loving and appropriate way. In a sinful world, marriage is an obligation, an obligation that allows a “dilemma” to be a means of grace.

Witness

I believe that the appropriate witness of the church at this time regarding same-gender marriage is that they, in the same

way as different-gender marriages, can be a faithful way of following Christ, and as such deserve the blessing — and discipline — of the church. This witness is particularly important in our social location in the midst of a society — and particularly among younger people — where promiscuity is prevalent, sex is for personal gratification, and, in the extreme cases, sex is used in a manipulative manner, to gain status or to find acceptance. Despite the failures of so many marriages, the witness of marriage as lifelong commitment, fidelity, and self-giving love is needed more than ever. I do not think we should deny the grace and discipline of marriage to those Christian disciples who desire it.

Finally, this witness is only one witness to the truth of the gospel. As in a court, it takes many witnesses, many voices, often conflicting, in order to discern the truth. Even minority views need to find voice and be heard. There may be some subjects on which the church is so sure it has obtained the truth that alternate views can only be heresy, but on this one, which considers such a major change to Christian tradition and past practice, conversation needs to remain open, humble and respectful... which is, after all, not a bad idea for all of our conversations.