

An invitation to the feast: A positive Biblical approach to equal marriage

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Some of the origins of this paper come from the disconcerting experience of finding myself in agreement with Bishop Keith Sinclair's Dissenting Statement to the Piling Report, at least in so far as he suggests that there is a "need for, and lack of, a biblical vision" and that "the report does not give an adequate account of biblical teaching".¹ I am not convinced, however, that Bishop Sinclair's own paper on biblical teaching² rectifies the problem.

Two words about what this paper is not. First, it is not an attempt to offer a new and refined method of reading the Bible, which will make scales fall from your eyes, your hearts burn within you and enlighten you as to how the Bible should have been read all along. This is ordinary Biblical theology. I do not intend to blind you with hermeneutical science!

Second, this is not a re-heated account of the seven texts in the Bible that refer to homosexual activity (Genesis 19.1-29; Judges 19.22-29; Leviticus 18.22; 20.13; Romans 1.26-27; 1 Cor. 6.9; 1 Timothy 1.10) which James Alison has called the "clobber texts". There are many commentaries on these texts.³ Too many arguments in favour of equal marriage are either content to dismiss the clobber texts, or to say that 'Jesus never talked about it' or that the Bible has been used in the past to support slavery and misogyny and leave it at that. The failure to develop a real positive biblical argument has ceded the Bible to those who oppose equal marriage, it brings the Bible into disrepute and it misses the riches that the Bible has to offer in this debate.

Why the interest in marriage?

Let me start by asking you to notice how unlikely it is that Christianity and the Christian Church should be saying anything at all about marriage. Jesus, the one whom we all seek to follow, was not married. Paul, the writer of more than half the New Testament and, if N. T. Wright is to be believed, the inventor of theology,⁴ suggested that "I wish that all were as I myself am" (1 Cor. 7.7), that is to say unmarried. Marriage, for Paul, is only for those who lack self-control. The Church of England's marriage liturgies accordingly struggle for biblical references. *Common Worship* merely states that marriage is "blessed by the presence of our Lord Jesus

¹ *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*, GS Misc 1929, (Church House Publishing, 2013), pp. 119-45, quotations from p. 127 and p. 137.

² Included as Appendix 3, pp. 158-75.

³ See, for example, Gareth Moore OP, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* (Continuum, 2003); Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent, 2014); and James Alison, *Undergoing God: dispatches from the scene of a break-in* (DLT, 2006), chapter 8. A recent conservative account can be found in Ian Paul, *Same-sex Unions: The Key Biblical Texts*. Grove Biblical 71 (Grove Books, 2014).

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (SPCK, 2013), p. 26.

Christ with those celebrating a wedding at Cana of Galilee”.⁵ The *Book of Common Prayer* is more creative, praying that “as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, (whereof this ring given and received is a token and pledge)”. However, given the parenting practices of Isaac and Rebecca, this prayer may be a mixed blessing. Jesus was unmarried. Paul recommended that Christians remain unmarried. The Church’s liturgies can identify only one married couple in the Old Testament suitable to recommend to those marrying in Church, together with the fact that Jesus attended a marriage. Given all of this, we ought to ask more often why the Church is so interested in marriage at all.

Marriage and the end times

The answer is very simple – the Church is interested in marriage because the Bible uses marriage to describe the ways in which God will bring all things to their completion and perfection. Thus the prophet Isaiah: “You shall no more be termed forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man married a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isaiah 62.4-5). In the book of Revelation, the same imagery is used: “Halleluiah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready ... Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19.6-7, 9).

What we have in Isaiah and Revelation is marriage as a description of the way in which God longs to be with his creation. The inclusion of the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs within the Bible and even the language of Genesis, with its statement that creation is “(very) good” (Genesis 1.4,10,12,18,21,25,31) also reflects this love of God for his creation. Marriage is one of the key ways that the Bible speaks about God’s relationship to his people and his creation. This is why the story of the wedding at Cana is so important. At the wedding feast of Cana, Jesus turns water into wine as a sign that it is in him that this marriage will at last come to be celebrated. This is also why so many of Jesus’ parables are set at weddings.⁶ Jesus may have said that “when they rise from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12.25). That may be because there is but one marriage in the resurrection – the marriage of God or Christ to the redeemed creation.

In his letter to the Ephesians, we see Paul taking marriage in exactly this way – as a sign of the relationship of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5.32). And yet he does this in the context of the subordination of women to men. This may be glossed by the command for husbands to “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave

⁵ *Common Worship: Pastoral Services* (Church House Publishing, 2000), p. 105.

⁶ See, for example, the parables of the Wedding Invitation (Matthew 22.1-14/Luke 14.15-24; the Lost Coin (Luke 15.8-9); the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25.1-13); and the Wedding Feast (Luke 14.7-14). In addition, the saying (*parabole*) about putting new wine into old wineskins (Mark 2.18-22/Matthew 9.14-17/Luke 5.33-39) is set in the context of a discussion of the presence of the bridegroom, and the reception given to the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32) clearly reflects elements of a wedding feast.

himself up for her” (Ephesians 5.25), but it is not removed by it. The context is also one in which the household code continues to place the marriage relationship in the context of the obedience of children and slaves.⁷

Marriage reflects God’s plans for the world. The faithful commitment of God to his people and to his creation is described in terms of marriage. Notice that God’s people are both male and female, and yet are all presented as female in this image of eschatological completion. (Perhaps we need papers explaining why men too can be Christians!) Human marriages are living parables of this divine plan. What is it that marks out marriage as pointing to the eschatological redemption of God’s people? It is the faithful commitment of the partners in the marriage. The question remains open as to how any particular marriage points to this eschatological relationship. No marriage will do this fully; all will do so partially and incompletely.

We are left with a question of judgement: Is the faithful commitment of marriages between those of the same gender any different to the faithful commitment of marriages between those of the different genders? My own experience testifies to the way in which relationships of both same-gender and different-gender couples can witness to this faithful commitment. Those would claim their experience testifies to the opposite will have to explain how difference in gender contributes, in a way that same-gendered couples cannot, precisely to that faithful commitment which is at the heart of the Biblical model.⁸

Marriage and the inclusive community

When Jesus healed the servant of a centurion (Matthew 8.5-13/Luke 7.1-10; John 4.46-54) tongues may have wagged. Gerd Theissen’s imaginative account of the life of Jesus as told by those in his shadow puts it this way: “Everyone knows that most of these Gentile officers are homosexual. Their orderlies are their lovers. But Jesus isn’t interested in that sort of thing. He didn’t ask anything about the orderly. He healed him – and the thought didn’t occur to him that later someone might think of appealing to him in support of the view that homosexuality was permissible.”⁹ Jeffrey John also raises this as a tentative possibility, and sets it in the context of Jesus’ boundary-crossing behaviour. “The probability that the relationship was homosexual would not have escaped Jesus, Matthew or Luke, and in view of Jesus’ systematic inclusion of so many other categories of person who were declared to be ‘unclean’ or ‘abominable’ under the levitical rules, it is a real question whether we are meant

⁷ A similarly problematic example of the household codes including marriage and slavery can be found in 1 Peter 2.18-3.7.

⁸ In the context of an argument against Gnosticism, ancient and modern, Tom Wright argues that “The two greatest New Testament eschatological scenes employ the imagery of marriage (Revelation 21) and childbirth (Romans 8). They thus indicate at a structural level that male/female complementarity is not a mere evolutionary accident, nor something confined to the old creation, nor yet an arrangement brought about through the intrusion of evil into the world, but is woven deep into the God-given world of both creation and new creation” (Tom Wright, *Creation, Power and the Truth: The gospel in a world of cultural confusion* (SPCK, 2013), p. 32). However, he fails at all to explain how the male/female complementarity he identifies serves, or even structures, the purposes of the imagery.

⁹ Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean: The quest of the historical Jesus in narrative form*. Trans. John Bowden. (SCM, 1987), p. 106.

to see Jesus deliberately ‘including’ homosexuals here as another category of the despised.”¹⁰

Whether or not this healing is meant to indicate an inclusion of gay people by Jesus, it is certainly a sign of the inclusion of Gentile people. This became the dominant conflict in the first Christian generation. Argument raged over whether one had to become a Jew as one became a Christian. In practice, this was an argument over whether Gentile Christians had to keep the food laws and (if they were male) be circumcised. The argument could get very heated (how little changes). On one occasion, Paul wrote that “If only those who are making trouble for you would cut the whole lot off!” (Galatians 5.12).¹¹

The Acts of the Apostles records this argument in a much more sedate manner. Peter is called to the house of another Roman centurion, Cornelius, where the Holy Spirit descends on those hearing before he has finished speaking to them and he can find no reason to withhold baptism from them (Acts 10). There are questions to answer when he returns to Jerusalem, but Peter answers the questions and there is rejoicing that God has given the gift of repentance that leads to life even to the Gentiles (Acts 11.1-18). Meanwhile Paul and Barnabas find themselves and their message about Jesus rejected by Jews and so turn to the Gentiles. The Gentiles are more fertile soil, and become believers (Acts 13.44-14.28). There is more controversy and so Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to speak with the apostles and elders of the Church. This has become known as the Council of Jerusalem. The Council ends with James the brother of Jesus delivering the decision that “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15.19-20).

Might this account of Gentile inclusion be a model for the inclusion of homosexual believers in the Church?¹² There is certainly much to commend it. Gentiles would, according to scripture, have to be circumcised in order to enter the people of God (Genesis 17.9-14). The council thus, overturns clear Biblical teaching in favour of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the (uncircumcised) Gentiles encountered by Peter, Paul and Barnabas. Andrew Goddard’s careful criticism of this approach makes two points that need mention. First, that James finds scriptural precedent for the admission of the Gentiles in the prophets (Amos 9.11-12; Jeremiah 12.15 and Isaiah 45.21). Goddard urges that for Acts 15 to become a paradigm of change in relation to homosexual Christians, a similar attempt to “provide a textual warrant in Scripture for changing the church’s teaching on homosexuality” is required.¹³ Further, Goddard goes on to note that the Council’s provisions seem to be an allusion to Leviticus 17 and 18. Thus the clobber text of Leviticus 18.22 (“You shall

¹⁰ Jeffrey John, *The Meaning in the Miracles* (Canterbury Press, 2001), p. 159.

¹¹ Tom Wright (translator), *The New Testament for Everyone* (SPCK, 2011). The NRSV puts this more prosaically (and with less accuracy in Paul’s imagery) as “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!”

¹² A good account of this is found in Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Blackwell, 1998), pp. 119-127.

¹³ Andrew Goddard, *God, Gentiles and Gay Christians: Acts 15 and Change in the Church*. Grove Ethics 121 (Grove Books, 2001), p. 12.

not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”) is actually reinforced by the call to abstain from fornication in Acts 15.

However, I think there are issues with Goddard’s argument. He seems to have missed how radically Acts departs from the scriptures in not requiring Gentiles to be circumcised. None of the texts cited by James speaks of uncircumcised Gentile admission. James himself makes a radical interpretative leap that Goddard does not seem to acknowledge. Secondly, the requirements of the Council are not equally observed, and have not been since the time of the Council itself. Paul continues to deal with issues of food that has been sacrificed to idols (in reality most meat in the Gentile world) in I Corinthians 8. There is not a great deal of outcry when Christians eat rare steaks, even though this too contravenes the Council’s ruling.

Whether gay Christians should be included in the church, and whether all forms of homosexual behaviour are in fact wrong is precisely what the church is called upon to judge today. Acts 15 suggests that this judgement be based on the gift of the Holy Spirit. I might remind you that “the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5.22).

There are those, however, who would argue that gay Christians can be accepted into the church, but only as those who are celibate. Such an argument has to reckon with St Paul. Paul was an advocate of celibacy, but reluctantly concedes it is not for everyone. “I would that all were as I myself am [that is, unmarried]. But each has a particular gift from God” (I Corinthians 7.7). He goes on to suggest that “it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (I Corinthians 7.9). There is wise pastoral counsel here, reminiscent of the understanding of the *Book of Common Prayer* that marriage “was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body.” Celibacy is a gift, and for those to whom it has not been given, Paul recommends marriage. Here too, we can ask about the presence of the Holy Spirit with those gay Christians who have been married. Have they received the gift of the Holy Spirit in and through their marriage, so that the fruit of the Spirit is evident? Has marriage been a remedy against sin enabling gay Christians to keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body, as it has for their straight sisters and brothers?

Marriage and creation

An appeal to creation may seem a strange place to locate a positive Biblical account of equal marriage. The Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission’s recently published *Men and Women in Marriage* builds on Genesis 1.27 (“God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”) and 2.24 (“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh”), as reinforced by Jesus (Matthew 19.4-5) to argue for an account of marriage that is intrinsically heterosexual.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Men and Women in Marriage: A document from the Faith and Order Commission published with the agreement of the House of Bishops of the Church of England and approved for study.* GS Misc 1046. (Church House Publishing, 2013). Two members of the Commission have now published articles dissenting from this teaching document: Charlotte Methuen, ‘Marriage: One Man and One Woman?’

However, it is far from clear that the texts can bear this weight. Genesis 1's account of the image of God must be handled carefully, lest it lead to the understanding that only couplings of men and women can show the image of God. Single people, or even married people apart from their spouses, also display the image of God. More dangerously, we should resist the idea that there is sexual differentiation within God. God does not have a gender. We can refer to God as 'Father' or as 'Mother', both can be found in Scripture, but these are not properly understood to be claims about the gender of God! The injunction in Genesis 1.28 to "Be fruitful and multiply" seems to be an injunction to the whole species and not just to a couple, let alone all couples.

It is also worth noting that the context of Jesus' remarks drawing together Genesis 1.27 with Genesis 2.24 is that of a dispute about divorce.¹⁵ Genesis 2.24 speaks of a man and a woman becoming "one flesh," which is a statement about kinship rather than a product of adding a man and a woman together. It is also worth remembering that this is an aetiological account, and the story of the human race would have been very short had God created Adam and Steve rather than Adam and Eve.

But given that this is an aetiological story, is there something important in the creation of sexually differentiated human beings who then form bonds between two sexually different individuals that we call marriage? There are three things to note here. One is that it took a very long time for monogamy to be seen as the result of this portion of scripture, although it is now a place to which a criticism of polygamy would look. Secondly, this has been taken to imply an account of female subordination. The first letter to Timothy explicitly cites the order of creation, as well as the deception of Eve by the serpent, as a reason for women to submit to men (1 Timothy 2.11-15).

The third thing that we should note, however, is the way in which the story of the creation of Adam and Eve proceeds as a story. It begins with a human being, *adam*, who God says should not be alone. God then makes the animals as potential helpers, and the *adam* names them but none is found suitable as a helper. Therefore God causes the *adam* to sleep and creates a woman from the rib of the *adam*. On waking, the *adam* joyfully says that at last a suitable partner has been found. He names her 'woman' (*'ishah*) and himself 'man' (*'ish*).

Gareth Moore regards much official church writing as missing the point of the story. "There is no 'meant to be' about the relationship between Adam and Eve, no

Open Democracy 12 April, 2013 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/charlotte-methuen/marriage-one-man-and-one-woman>); and Mike Higton, 'Men and Women in Marriage' *Kai euthus* 19 March, 2014 (and three subsequent posts) (<http://mikehigton.org.uk/men-and-women-in-marriage/>). See also Nigel Biggar, 'Men and Women in Marriage: Does it Add Up?' *Theology* 117/2 (2014), pp. 94-99.

¹⁵ *Men and Women in Marriage* does not place Matthew 19.4-5 in the context of teaching on divorce (p. 2). It does later concede that divorce is "a pastoral accommodation" but denies that this is in any way "redefining marriage" (p. 15). The implication is that no such accommodation is possible in relation to couples of the same gender. This would appear to privilege gender difference over permanence as a characteristic of marriage.

preconceived divine model of who or what is meant to be Adam's companion, a model to which Adam is somehow duty-bound to conform. All depends on Adam's reaction ... when the narrator remarks that among all the animals he did not find a help fit for him (v. 20), the impression is given that there might have been, that this is a genuine attempt to find a help fit for him."¹⁶ Moore goes on to point to the nature of the *adam* at the start of the story as the representative human being. Thus when God says "It is not good that the man [*adam*] should be alone" (Gen. 2. 18), this is said of all human beings, not merely heterosexual ones. "It is here that we see the final bankruptcy of the compulsory heterosexuality interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve. Not only does it misrepresent God as one who imposes his will regardless of human delight, but, in the case of lesbians and gay men, it completely undermines the dynamic that leads to the creation of Eve."¹⁷ Human beings are created to experience the delight that Adam has in encounter with Eve. This is for all human beings, not just for those who are heterosexual.

The gifts of same sex marriage

What Moore has drawn our attention to is the way in which compulsory heterosexual readings of the Bible are mis-readings, and undermine the goods of marriage that they seek to support. In the case of Genesis 2, this is in relation to the delight of Adam for Eve. Adam rejoices in Eve, he is not forced to accept her. There is an important role for consent, alongside delight and desire here. In the case of I Corinthians 7, I have suggested that this undermines the account of celibacy that Paul offers. Imposed celibacy undermines the ability of the Christian tradition to offer and account of celibacy that is liberating and which throughout Christian history has been one of the key sources for empowering women.

All of this has serious consequences, and can lead to what might be describes as an idolatry of heterosexual marriage. Marriage, as the eschatological account with which I began shows, is valued by Christians because it points to the action of God in redeeming the whole of creation. Too much recent Christian discussion of marriage has lost sight of the goods to which marriage points, and instead has focussed on marriage as an end in itself. As well as the obvious exclusion of a whole group of people, Christian and non-Christian, this leads to an inability to be critical of what happens within (heterosexual) marriage.

The invitation to the feast is not, therefore, simply about inviting those in same-sex relationships into the status of marriage. Those forming same-sex marriages bring their own gifts to the feast which will improve different-gender marriage, if only we can claim them. Same-sex marriage can remind us that marriage points us to God and that marriage is not a space for male domination of females. Heterosexual marriage needs to be equal marriage as well! It offers an opportunity to reclaim celibacy as a liberating space for those to whom it is given as a gift; and the opportunity to reclaim children as gifts to and the responsibility of the whole Christian community.

A final text

¹⁶ Moore, *A Question of Truth*, p. 142.

¹⁷ Moore, *A Question of Truth*, p. 143.

Let me finish, then, with what is for me a crucial text in all of this. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God” (1 John 4.7). There is a real danger in the way that this debate is being conducted that Christians fail to be able to identify love when they see it, and that in so failing that we will fail to identify God. Throughout this paper, I have identified places where judgements have to be made. On whether there is any difference in the witness to the faithfulness of God between a gay and straight marriage; on whether gay relationships demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit. Here I add another. Can two people of the same gender love one another? I don’t mean desire or be attracted or enjoy good times together, I mean love. Self-giving, care providing, bloody minded, doggedly faithful love. If the answer is ‘yes’, then there is only the question of how that love can be supported and disciplined (disciplined).

The Archbishop of Canterbury has pointed to “gay relationships that are just stunning in the quality of the relationship.”¹⁸ However, the Church of England as an institution does not have any meaningful way of embodying this insight. Institutionally, we fail to see love, holiness and the work of the Spirit when it is in front of us in the lives and relationships of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. This is an institutional pharisaism which should greatly concern us. We are truly in danger of being those who “have eyes, and fail to see” (Mark 8.18). Jesus warned his disciples then and he warns us now to “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees” (Mark 8.15).

¹⁸ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21860447> (consulted 30.9.2014).