**Is there a theological basis for ‘same-sex marriage’? The need for a narrative.**

**This contribution to discussion of same-sex marriage in the URC has been written and submitted by Rev Malcolm Hanson.**

There is by now a common understanding that we need to deal with the issue of homosexuality and same-sex relationships, and with one another, in terms of a theology of grace and the practice of graciousness. However, that should not be an excuse for a lack of clarity over the issues.

General Assembly has asked local congregations and synods “to discuss whether they would wish a future meeting of the Assembly to authorise local church meetings to offer same-sex marriage services.” Yet nowhere in the resources supplied or recommended is there a clear definition of what a same-sex marriage is, nor of the theology which might underly it. In the church’s current discussions, the danger is that we may be quite unclear, even confused, about what we might be permitting and why we might be doing so.

In fact, there is a mismatch between the resources supplied and the question being asked. *One plus One* is a document designed to assist general discussion of some of the issues, while the question being asked is about a policy which has no supporting argumentation and which certainly has no basis in *One plus One*. The discussion is clearly as yet unresolved, and nothing in the resources professes to offer a way forward. Giving permission to local churches to take their own decisions therefore without any parameters or guidelines looks like an abdication of responsibility. Putting it another way, there is no coherence between the two key parts of the resolution passed by General Assembly in July 2014 - “to invite synods and local congregations (a) to reflect on the report of the Facilitation Group, (b) to discuss whether they would wish a future meeting of the Assembly to authorise local church meetings to offer same-sex marriage services.”

What further help then is needed?

In much contemporary culture, and even in government legislation, same-sex relationships are seen as a valid expression of sexuality. Such relationships are now recognised under the civil partnerships legislation, which gives them the status of equality in terms of the contractual aspects of a committed and legally binding relationship. From the perspective of the Reformed tradition, we may have differing views about this civil settlement. Whether and how people in such relationships are prayed for or blessed might well be deemed a local and pastoral matter.

However, a civil partnership between people of the same gender is not the same as marriage. That is evidently recognised by the pressure to make ‘marriage’ a possibility for such couples. Also, heterosexual couples may, of course, marry, but not, currently, enter civil partnerships. So we need to be clear about what we mean by marriage, and if we find that we need to redefine our terminology so that it conforms to the government’s definition, we need to be clear about the reasons and the theology involved. Without that kind of understanding it is difficult to see how the church can hope for any kind of consensus in its present discussions. We need to know what marriage is and what it might be in the future.

What are we doing in conducting marriage ceremonies? The traditional Reformed answer might be to say - we are recognising, affirming, celebrating and praying for the commitment of a man and woman to each other within the God-given, pro-creative pattern of marriage. Using the term ‘pro-creative pattern' here is reminder that it is a man and a woman who are marrying and that the very reason for the existence of sex and sexual difference and sexual desire is procreation. Our anatomy is designed for it, our species depends on it, marriage affirms it. Whether or not a couple are able or wish to have children does not alter that basic principle.

We have commonly understood marriage to be based on the Genesis model, endorsed by Jesus and confirmed by nature. Rejecting a sacramental understanding of marriage, the Reformed tradition has come to regard marriage as an ‘ordinance’, in other words something ordained by God for the good of all humanity. There is, of course, much more that might be said about marriage, but at its heart, ‘one plus one’ is about the union of complementaries.

When we then talk about same-sex relationships, we are considering something which - no matter how sympathetic or accepting we may be - is not foundational but exceptional, which does not conform to the pattern of marriage as traditionally understood, and which does not reflect the ‘norm’ of nature. It needs to be understood in some other way. It is difficult, therefore, to perceive it as an ordinance of God.

We also face a continuing biblical puzzle. It is clear that all the biblical references to homosexuality are negative and condemnatory. That tragically has resulted in great anguish for many people. The contemporary answer is to say that these passages are not speaking about what are now understood as long-term, loving, committed same-gender relationships. There is a difference, in other words, between that which is abusive or promiscuous and that which is loving and mutual. That distinction may help to highlight that which is deeply harmful and wrong in some homosexual activity (just as in some heterosexual activity) and which still needs to be condemned, and in suggesting, on the other hand, that there is another, potentially beneficent, kind of relationship. But the latter lacks a biblical model and still needs a theological interpretation. In other words, if we dismiss Leviticus 18:22 (“Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman”) and similarly negative passages as not relevant to our present understanding of sexuality, how do we handle Genesis 2:24 (“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh”) and similarly positive passages? Or, how do we turn the pattern of male/female relationship, endorsed and recognised in marriage, into an understanding of a same-sex relationship, and how is that relationship to be understood in biblical terms?

Whether or not marriage is strictly a doctrinal issue, the church expresses its beliefs not just through its statements but through its practices and its liturgies. ‘Ordinances’ of the church express the doctrinal understanding of the church, and are significant not just for the church but in the wider context of society. A marriage ceremony is a doctrinal statement about our understanding of humanity and God’s creation. Extending it to same-sex relationships requires a doctrinal context, and that is something which requires rigorous scrutiny and affirmation by the church as a whole.

It is not adequate to say or imply that the differences between heterosexual and homosexual relationships are not significant, or to suggest that same-sex relationships are equally ordained by God for the good of all. The redefining of marriage to include couples of the same gender needs a firmer basis. Because there is no scriptural model from which to work, some other theological and theoretical basis has to be found to justify this extension of the Reformed understanding of marriage, perhaps in terms of ‘difference’ or some other qualification. It is the lack of this rationale that makes the use of the word ‘marriage’ so difficult.

In all of this, of course, we understand that we are not just talking about doctrine or rationales, but about people’s lives and deep sensitivities. Recognising that, we need to do all we can to provide clear frameworks within which relationships may be understood.

To make sense of this then, and for the church to move forward with any kind of unity, even though that may well have to be with diversity, there needs to be a much clearer understanding of the arguments for using the word ‘marriage’ in connection with same-sex committed relationships, and probably a clearer understanding of homosexuality itself as well. It would also help this process to know what the liturgical implications might be - what words might be used, what concepts and messages might be conveyed, and what would not be included in a service of ‘same-sex marriage’.

Local churches in particular need that clarification before they can hope to discuss adequately the question of allowing practice to be decided locally. The whole church, whether there is agreement or not, needs to know what is being offered in a ceremony of same-sex marriage, not least because this is something that has not been offered previously, but also because our present services do not include what is essentially a new rite, and because our theological redefinition of marriage has not yet been adequately formed.

In summary, diversity of practice in an area of such sensitivity, should not be based on incomprehension or impatience or government edict, but as far as humanly possible, on mutual respect and understanding. In other words, before disagreement or division or diversity are legitimised by General Assembly, and each local church is permitted to do what it feels is right, ‘same-sex marriage’ needs a narrative which parallels the traditional narrative of heterosexual marriage. It is the lack of that narrative which is hampering progress.

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