

My Thoughts for Submission to the Commission on the Marriage Canon

[Is there a distinction between civil marriage and Christian marriage?]

A Christian marriage includes some things that might not be included in a civil marriage. The life-long vows are given “in the sight of God,” (“in the context of an act of worship” in our rite for *Blessing of a Civil Marriage*) and composed to reflect an understanding of a divine context for the marriage. The character of the marriage—its “purposes and intentions”—will be consistent with truth revealed by scripture.

[How do you interpret what scripture says about marriage?]

Everything that scripture says about marriage makes the assumption that it involves a man and a woman. It was written when homosexuals were misunderstood and did not seek to be publically recognized as a couple permanently united in love. Now that same-sex couples in Canada seek that recognition (and find it in civil law), we can see that this is the Spirit leading us to interpret the deeper message of scripture without making that old assumption. We find that we can apply the values expressed in scripture— commitment to permanence, fidelity, love, union— to both kinds of relationships with equal ease.

If we change the wording of the canon and the liturgy to remove the old assumption, they remain meaningful reflections of the biblical idea of what characterizes marriage. (“*Man and woman* become one flesh” can become “*two people* become one flesh;” “*as husband and wife* give themselves to each other” can become “*as a couple* give themselves to each other.”)

[How do you understand the theological significance of gender difference in marriage?]

The theological significance of gender difference in marriage is a secondary one.

The marriage canon currently assumes that the couple consists of two people of different genders. The only theological significance I see in the pairing of a man and a woman is that it conforms to the prototypical human couple described in our story of God’s creation of humanity.

But gender difference is not the only point of that story.

God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” God then creates “every animal of the field and every bird of the air.” None proves a satisfactory helper. The helper that ultimately proves satisfactory is taken from Adam’s own flesh. In order for the story of humanity to continue it is biologically necessary that the first helper is of the opposite sex. But it is not the gender difference that makes the woman the satisfactory helper for the man. It is that she is *a fellow human being*.

[How do you understand the theological significance of companionship in marriage?]

Surely the story of Adam and Eve shows us that the most important thing we mark with the sacrament of marriage is that God looks with favour on two people who decide to “not be alone”—to “become one flesh” like the first two humans.

[What is the theological significance of bearing and raising children?]

Another theological significance of gender difference is that it creates the possibility of bearing children. Bearing children is one of the ways a married couple can participate in God’s activity in the world—specifically the miracle of the creation of life. But the parenthetical remark in the marriage canon—“if it may”—is an acknowledgement that “bearing and raising children” is not a defining characteristic of marriage. It is merely a potential— one possible element of marriage. Hence we still marry people who do not intend or are too old to have children, and we do not

consider a childless couple to be any “less married” than a couple engaged in nurturing their biological child.

When discussing same-sex marriage, while we cannot consider the theological significance of bearing children, we can examine separately the significance of *raising* children. (This would apply in the same way to a couple raising an adopted child.) Raising children is another one of the ways a married couple can participate in God’s activity in the world. One of our central, most pervasive metaphors for God is the image of a parent caring for, nurturing, protecting, loving unconditionally the child entrusted to them.

[What is the theological significance of the relationship between marriage and sexuality?]

Scripture shows us that another thing we acknowledge with the sacrament of marriage is that God looks with favour on sexuality that finds expression in a recognized committed relationship. Whether it finds expression in attraction to the same sex or the opposite sex doesn’t appear to be dealt with. (That is, our concept of same-sex marriage never occurred to the biblical writers.)

[How do you understand the sacramentality of marriage?]

There is no aspect of a same-sex committed relationship, then, that is not consistent with God’s activity in the world. The Church should recognize the “inward and spiritual grace” present in the union with the “outward and visible signs” found in the sacrament of marriage.

[What is the difference between marriage and the blessing of a relationship?]

The marriage rite includes the exchange of vows that makes the couple wedded. It is followed by a part called “The Blessing of the Marriage.” Though it is called a blessing of the *marriage*, it calls down or confers God’s favour on *the two people* who have just been married.

In our liturgy “The Blessing of a Civil Marriage” (Rite I), the husband and wife have already said their vows in a previous ceremony, but each says they “affirm and renew” them and then adds: “and I ask God to bless our marriage.” In “Blessing and Celebration After a Civil Marriage” (Rite II), the husband and wife ask for the blessing together. In both rites there follows the same “Blessing of the Marriage” that is in the marriage rite, conferring God’s favour on the two people.

That suggests to me that when the marriage is performed “in the context of an act of worship” there is no need to ask for God’s blessing of the relationship. It is already implicit.

I imagine that any same-sex couple who want to mark their commitment in Christian terms would like there to be no need to ask for God’s blessing of the relationship.

This is where I would like to see the Anglican Church of Canada go. This is where I hear the Spirit leading us.

Unfortunately, there are still many in the worldwide and the Canadian Anglican communion who are not ready for this. Perhaps we could get most of the way by not making this a matter of doctrine, but offering a same-sex version of our rite for blessing of a civil marriage. I understand that would leave individual clergy the option of saying they did not feel the particular civil marriage qualified for blessing.

Perhaps in time we could get the rest of the way.

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