

"Is Same-Sex Marriage Appropriate?"

Submission to Commission on the Marriage Canon, Anglican Church of Canada by the Rev. Dr. Brett Cane¹

Introduction

The blessing of same-sex unions has been debated hotly for over two decades within the Anglican Church of Canada. As part of that debate, a move to discuss a full embracing and institution of same-sex marriage within the canons of the Church was initiated by General Synod (2007). The findings of the task force (drawn from the members of the Faith Worship & Ministry Committee (FWM)) are found in the Rothesay Report which was received by General Synod in 2010.² In the ensuing discussion at that gathering of the wider topic of same-sex blessings it was pointed out that the members of FWM were evenly divided as to the propriety of such blessings.

In terms of sanctioning same-sex marriage, one of the members of the task force states that "The Report contained the best case that the committee felt it could make for same-sex marriage, and did *not* signify that any or all of the members were satisfied with the case that was made: we were simply carrying out the instruction to 'prepare a theological rationale'."³ Given the lack of consensus in that previous attempt to discern justification for a change in belief and practice, I would like to examine three concerns⁴ that were not adequately addressed in the report that I feel need to be dealt with by the current Commission on the Marriage Canon:

- Marriage as a Fact of Nature - the natural argument
- Marriage as an Institution of Creation - the legal argument
- Marriage as a Blessing from God - the biblical argument

Even though I am calling the last point, "The Biblical Argument", I am going to be using the Bible throughout what follows as my standpoint because my context is that of the Christian Church. I will conclude with a question I have as to the possible sources of the impetus to recognize the marriage of partners in same-sex unions.

Marriage as a Fact of Nature

The first concern is over the issues of sexual complementarity and procreation, and their role in our theological anthropology. In other words, are maleness and femaleness essential to marriage along with procreation? The role of children and marriage is an important one, but a little more complicated as there can be childless heterosexual marriages and same-sex unions with children.⁵ What I do want to do is look at the essential nature of marriage as the union of two complementary sexual opposites and to do so, I will use the Bible, although I believe there are also arguments from natural law.

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² The Rothesay Report (2010), found on <http://archive.anglican.ca/gs2010/wp-content/uploads/009c-Appendix-B-FWM-The-Rothesay-Report.pdf>

³ Personal correspondence (January 2013), with The Ver. Rev. Dr. Iain Luke, one member of the compiling task force. Used with permission.

⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Luke for his enunciating these points; *ibid*.

⁵ For further discussion on this aspect, please see "22 Mistakes about Marriage," Augustine College, Toronto, found on http://www.augustinecollege.org/downloads/Text/Tingley_22-Mistakes-About-Marriage.pdf

A lot of Christians, when they approach the issues of same-sex marriage and the Bible, do so by looking at passages in Scripture that address homosexual practice specifically. I feel it is better to look at those which give the Bible's view on sexuality in general. If you ask someone what a forest looks like and they go up to a tree and examine a twig, they could say, "A forest consists of thin stems, horizontal to the ground." You would come away with a misunderstanding of trees and forests because you chose to examine an aspect in isolation. It is exactly the same with regards to homosexuality. Until you are able to stand back and see the overall Biblical perspective on God's gift of sexuality, you will not be able to place individual elements or passages in the right context. This is what has happened when Christians have looked at same-sex unions from the Biblical perspective - they have focussed on the six passages⁶ that specifically mention same-sex relationships.

Therefore we begin at the beginning – Genesis 1 and 2. Here we are given two different perspectives of creation, probably stemming from different sources, but carefully arranged side by side under the inspiration of God. Genesis 1 looks at creation at the cosmic level, Genesis 2 at the human level. Both speak about sexuality and its purposes. In Genesis 1:27-28, it says,

God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

Here, we see that humanity's separate sexes are a reflection of God's image. Animals share this differentiation, but human sexuality appears here to be connected with or flow from, their special status of being made in God's image. This implies that the union of the two sexes gives the fuller reflection of God's image. That is not saying that an individual man or woman is of any less value, but that when male and female come together in marriage or community, together they reflect the "fullness" of God more completely.

This is affirmed in the next chapter when a human as an individual is alone and it is not good:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air...But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:18-24).

It is neither amongst the animals nor another being of like sex that God creates as a partner, but one which complements the other – both anatomically and emotionally. Here, the emphasis is not on procreation, as in chapter 1 (this is only mentioned later in the same story in 3:16), but on "the relational (including physical/sexual) complementarity of male and female, that is, on the companionship and support provided by heterosexual marriage."⁷

⁶ Genesis 19:1-11; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:9-10

⁷ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice; Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), pg. 61.

Robert Gagnon, in his book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, says that "Marriage between a man and a woman reunites (the) representatives of the two sexes into 'one flesh' and is not simply the union of two individuals. The missing part of man is found in woman and vice-versa."⁸ The sexual union of man and woman in marriage, of two complementary beings, makes possible a single, composite human being restoring humanity's original wholeness. This union is so crucial that "the marital bond between man and woman takes precedence even over the bond with the parents that physically produced them."⁹ "Sexual intercourse or marriage between members of the same sex does not restore the disunion because it does not reconnect complementary beings."¹⁰

As the Bible unfolds, not a single hero of the faith engages in homosexual conduct;¹¹ every regulation affirming the sexual bond is that of a man and a woman without exception; all Old Testament laws and proverbs and New Testament passages regulating and establishing proper boundaries for relationships are for heterosexual ones, none for homosexual. To this we add the heterosexual imagery in both Testaments of our relationship to God: God and Israel as wife; Christ and the Church as bride.¹²

This complementariness of male and female, emotionally, anatomically, sexually, and procreatively, is the setting for sexuality throughout the Bible, and is the background for the critiques of same-sex unions as contrary to nature that we find in both Testaments and Jewish thought.¹³ To call a same-sex union a "marriage" goes contrary to this understanding of the nature of marriage.

Marriage as an Institution of Creation

The second concern is the recognition that the institution of marriage is pre-ecclesial as well as pre-civil, raising questions about *anyone's* authority to change its form; while law and custom have been used to limit or exclude certain forms (such as polygamy), it is a different matter to create a new form altogether.

Same-sex partnerships have existed in many societies¹⁴ and some have argued that same-sex marriage rites existed in the church in earlier times¹⁵ but these claims have been disputed.¹⁶

⁸ Ibid, pg. 194.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 61.

¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 194.

¹¹ Some have seen homosexual overtones in the relationship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18:1-4; however, the actions described can be readily understood in light of the political conventions of the day, not the sexual. No words with sexual overtones (e.g. "lie" or "know") are used and David's unmistakable heterosexual activities (and sin) are clearly spoken of in the rest of Scripture. See Gagnon, *ibid.*, pgs. 146-154.

¹² E.g. Isaiah 62:5, Revelation 21:2. Further affirmation of the universal biblical negation of homosexual practice is seen in the fact that it is found in all the literary strands people have detected in the first six books of the Bible: J, P, and the Holiness Code, along with the Deuteronomic prohibitions against cult prostitution and cross dressing (Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 22:5).

¹³ Gagnon sees direct or indirect references to homosexual practice in the following texts: Texts: Genesis 9:20-27; 19:4-11; Judges 19:22-25; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Ezekiel. 16:50 (possibly too 18:12 and 33:26); Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; probably also Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:7. To these can be added references to homosexual cult prostitution: Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:14; Revelation 21:8; 22:15. *Ibid.*, pg. 432.

¹⁴ e.g. "A History of Gay Marriage" (Feb. 4, 2011), found on <http://www.randomhistory.com/history-of-gay-marriage.html>

¹⁵ John Boswell, *The Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*. (New York: Villard, 1994)

¹⁶ e.g. "The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon (7th Century)" found on <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/sykeon-adelpho.asp> but see a rebuttal in favour of Boswell, "Reviewing Boswell", by Paul Halsall, December 17 1995, found

However, in the Bible, the institution of heterosexual marriage is without parallel and goes back to the very beginning - long before Moses and the law. Thus it is shown as a rite of creation, not something humans invented or devised in law or religion. One could argue that same-sex marriage is a human innovation to accommodate a deviation from the natural order and thus it would be out of order (no matter what your view of the rightness or wrongness of homosexual unions) to sanction it as marriage.

Marriage as a Blessing from God

We now move on to the concept of "blessing" which is integral to a wedding in church. A Christian marriage ceremony is seen as a blessing from God upon the union. In fact, the church doesn't marry you at all - you marry each other and the church recognizes it and gives God's blessing - which is why the service in the BCP is called the "Solemnization of Marriage." In front of a Justice of the Peace, there is no blessing, but the state recognizes and legitimizes the union through the ceremony.

We need to first address what we mean when we speak of "blessing" because there is much confusion here. People say, "Well we bless warships and foxhunts (or used to) so why not same-sex unions and call them marriages?" In the Bible, blessing has two main thrusts (I wish to thank Ephraim Radner, professor at Wycliffe College, Toronto, as the source of my comments which follow):¹⁷

1. First, we bless God for who he is or what he has given us as in "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name" (Psalm 103:1) and when saying a "blessing" over food - which is really blessing God for what he has provided. Blessing in this sense is either praise or thankfulness to God.
2. Secondly, and this is the main thrust of blessing in the Bible, God blesses *us* (or other living things in nature) as in Genesis 1 (28) "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" Blessing in this sense is for fulfilment and achievement of God's design or will - here for procreation and purpose or mission. We see this confirmed when God gives Moses the blessing the priests are to speak over the people of Israel, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26). and then adds, "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them" (Numbers 6:27). Now, "Carrying the 'name' of God has to do with assuming the life of God, God's will, God's purpose, God's character."¹⁸ So when humans bless people, they are first, asking the Lord to bless them, and second, "praying for God's will to be gratefully assumed"¹⁹ by the recipient of the blessing.

Radner, points out that it is not always possible to distinguish clearly between blessing as giving thanks and blessing as asking for God's purposes to be carried out because "the second depends on the reality of the first...the things we 'bless' are capable of receiving it in part because they are

on <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/bosrevdisc-kennedy1.asp>. See Wikipedia article on John Boswell, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Boswell

¹⁷ I want to acknowledge my debt to Ephraim Radner for his article, "Blessing: A Scriptural and Theological Reflection," in *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XIX, Vol. 1, Winter 2010

¹⁸ Radner, pg. 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*.

already capable of blessing God as we do"²⁰ which is why the Psalmist can cry out, "Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!" (Psalm 103:22). Radner goes on to say, "There is a sense, then, that *we* bless what is *already* blessed by God"²¹ - and that which is capable of blessing God in return - from rocks and trees to birds and beasts, children and infants - everything which is part of God's creative purpose.

This is where the difficulty with same-sex unions comes in. As we have seen, the sexual union that is blessed by God in the Bible is between members of the opposite sex, not the same. In fact, wherever same-sex sexual activity is mentioned, it is forbidden.²² So how can we bless in marriage what God has not? But what about the good things many of us can see in some of the same-sex unions we know of - lifelong partnerships that show genuine devotion and faithfulness and are a blessing to others? Radner points out that there are many situations in life that are, by nature, not consistent with God's design and will, such as warfare, non-Christian religions, lotteries, etc., but in which much can be found that is good and is commendable. We can bless the good of the part but not the whole.²³ Thus, same-sex unions, while having some aspects capable of blessing, can not be blessed by God as a whole and thus can not be described as marriage.

Final Question

My final point is that I have a question: Why the continuing impetus for same-sex marriage to be sanctioned by the Church? I have three suggestions that may or may not be accurate but that I wish to offer to bring a wider perspective to the debate.

1. ***Guilt:*** Growing-up (especially amongst boys), there is a natural aversion to same-sex attraction and relationships that comes from somewhere. Is it just culturally conditioned? Is it an innate distaste that is designed to lead us away from a practice that is physically, psychologically and spiritually detrimental to our well-being? Whatever the origin, such feelings get easily translated into bigotry and homophobia. Is the impetus a reaction to the guilt arising out of that on the part of wider society?
2. ***Sentimentality:*** In approaching this issue, many people have misconstrued what it means to be loving and say that to accept others means we have to agree with their behaviour. Jesus sets the example of a loving, non-condemnatory attitude while holding to a traditional moral standard in his interaction with the woman caught in adultery: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (John 8:11). Have people forgotten to hold together truth and love (Ephesians 4:15) and drifted into sentimentality (which is love without truth)?
3. ***Legitimation:*** If, as I have explained, same-sex activity is contrary to nature, is there a desire on the part of those involved in same-sex partnerships to legitimate, by redefining marriage, such behaviour as normal to compensate for an underlying guilt and dis-ease?

Whatever the motivation, I do not feel that the move towards sanctioning same-sex marriage within the Church is appropriate in view of the traditional understanding of Scripture that same-sex marriage is against nature, is not an institution of creation and is not subject to the blessing of God as marriage.

²⁰ Ibid..

²¹ Ibid..

²² Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:9-10

²³ Ibid., pgs. 26-27.