

“For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God’s word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their Matrimony lawful.” (Book of Common Prayer 1962 p. 565)

### Friends with Benefits

We all might wonder whether marriage has been reduced to “friends with benefits” in the understanding and practice of both our society and church. The Anglican Church of Canada and the Anglican Communion have moved along with and not too far behind our society in viewing sex as intended for our recreation instead of procreation. This shift is perhaps more radical and fundamental than the current proposed changes to our canons and practices.

The Church of England website [yourchurchwedding.org](http://yourchurchwedding.org) boldly promises couples, “marriage provides more and better sex.” On that webpage we learn from theologians and influential authors that marriage “typically brings spectacular sexual rewards” and these are all the more important since “sexual activity is strongly and invariably correlated with happiness.”

It cannot be without a strong sense of irony that that quotation is put on a Church webpage since the Apostle Paul offers exactly the opposite opinion. While allowing that a widow is at liberty to marry if and whom she wills, Paul suggests that in his inspired estimation she would be happier without a husband (1 Corinthians 7. 39 and 40).

This is but one small, glaring and amusing example of how far our sexual ethics and understanding of marriage have strayed from their biblical and catholic roots. If there is no full happiness outside of more and better sex, which is to be had by voluntary sexual activity between committed couples, standing in the way of such *marriages* is more than unjust. But Christians know of a far greater and eternal blessedness in the knowledge and love of God and of one another in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The consummation and union for which we all long and towards which all our desires are to be trained is the marriage of the Lamb and his bride.

## Biblical and Catholic Authority

While we have and do disagree greatly on the pastoral care and direction particularly appropriate for gay and lesbian Christians, the issue of same sex marriage is a question not just of pastoral care or provision but of the doctrine and discipline of the Church. There is neither clear biblical warrant nor catholic precedent and consensus for the redefinition of marriage to include same sex couples, however faithful and loving such relationships may be.

To proceed with the proposed redefinition of marriage outside of that biblical and universal authority would be to sever ourselves from our Catholic and Reformed roots. The plain teaching of Scripture and the universal tradition of the Church do not support such a radical redefinition, nor do we have a common and adequate understanding of the development of doctrine that would make such a move thinkable. Article XX reminds us that ‘it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.’”

## Sin and Grace

The model and ideal before us as Christians is the person, life and teaching of Jesus Christ the Son of God who reveals and restores the fullness and dignity of our human nature. Despite the record of the Old Testament and the customs of the day, our Lord himself recalls us to the original purpose of the Creator in marriage in the face of our broken vows and compromises and explicitly confirms that marriage is intended to be the lifelong union of one man and one woman.

We have failed to teach and reach for that ideal in innumerable ways and it may be that the redefinition of marriage to include same sex couples is the logical next step of our unfaithfulness. We have long neglected and forgotten any standards of sexual morality within marriage.

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous.

Hebrews 13.4

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen

who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness.

1 Thessalonians 4.3-7

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control. I say this by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. 1 Corinthians 7.1-7

...the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife...the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. 1 Corinthians 7.33-34

One of the greatest tragedies of our current debates is our failure to recognize, across the distinctions of gay and straight and bisexual and the battle lines of ecclesiastical politics, our common sinfulness, struggles and failures to live holy lives. For one party it seems as if there is no sin left but homosexuality and for the other homophobia. We are trapped in the crossfire between the self-righteous and the self-justifying.

The truth is that we are all sexual sinners. All our compromised and self serving standards of sexual morality are blown apart by our Lord who equates the lustful glance with adultery (Matthew 5.28). We might well respond with the disciples, "Who then can be saved?" So we are recalled to the Gospel of grace, to the forgiveness, love, healing and holiness which we all need and which Christ alone can offer.

It was in the context of a dispute about sexual morality and the law that Jesus convicted all his hearers of sin.

"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on

the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. St. John 8.7-9

It may surprise us that the eldest were the first to drop their stones and walk but perhaps we might recognize that to know our own brokenness is one clear sign of maturity. Jesus then speaks to those convicted of their own sexual brokenness, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." (St. John 8.11) Our message is not condemnation by the law but salvation by grace.

That Gospel is the same to everyone, whatever their sexual orientation and past, repentance and forgiveness of sins and new life in the name of Jesus who died and was buried and rose again. Within the fellowship of the Catholic Church and under the authority of the Scriptures that new life for gay and lesbian Christians cannot involve *marriage* with a same sex partner. The challenge before us is to rediscover a sexual ethic that is faithful to the Scriptures and Tradition of the Church and that convicts all and comforts all and calls all to an equally expensive holiness.

The proposed change to the Marriage Canon would put this Church in contempt of the Word of God but we must also recall that his Commandment includes the call to love one another, to bear with one another, to be tender hearted and forgiving, seeking to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

From contempt of thy Word and Commandment, and of one another,

Good Lord, deliver us.

With my prayers for the Commission and for all of us in the Anglican Church of Canada and my thanks to God for our fellowship in Christ,

+Michael

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