

Preamble

In what follows, I recognize that I have left a number of important issues unaddressed such as the distinction between civil and Christian marriage, the difference between relationship-blessing and marriage, the connection between procreation and marriage, or the role of companionship and sexual fulfilment within marriage. Others have written eloquently about those issues. In the interest of brevity I've limited myself to the question about how I interpret the scriptures.

In the end I find myself unable to support a change to the marriage canon. I don't yet see a way of reinterpreting the simple scriptural witness about marriage without unravelling the creational, redemptive, and sacramental tapestry of God's word to us.

I hope I'm not misheard. I don't believe we should resist a change simply so things can stay the same—as though mere traditionalism counted as faithfulness. Neither should we rush to change in the name of progress, or of enlightenment, or out of fear of ending up “on the wrong side of history”—as though faithfulness doesn't call us to resist certain changes. Faithfulness, I take it, requires us to hear well and to love well. This is the sticking point for me: I worry that this change in the marriage canon will make it harder for all of us to hear and trust God's voice in the scriptures and in the sacraments.

How do you interpret what scripture says about marriage?

How do I interpret what scripture says about marriage? To begin with, the “how” in that question involves more than my hermeneutical approach or exegetical conclusions. It includes the struggle of trying to interpret the scriptures so that I—and we—pay the only debt that matters, the debt to love (Rom 13.8). In the context of the recent proposal raised about Canon XXI, I confess: I feel caught between God and neighbour. If I support the existing canon, I risk stopping my ears to the voices of some of our LGBTQ siblings in the Lord. I take that to be a serious thing. But If I support a change to the canon, I risk stopping my ears to the voice of God as the church has heard it in the Scriptures.

When I read Genesis and Revelation, I see marriage anchored both in the beginning and in the end. In the beginning, God created human beings male and female to become one flesh (Gen 1–2). In the end, God gives the church as a bride to wed his son Jesus Christ (Rev 19, 21). Whether we stand for or against a change to the canon, I think we need to admit that if we change the marriage canon we *detach* marriage from both its scriptural beginning and its scriptural end. The proposed change would obscure the connection between marriage and our created goodness just as it would obscure the connection between marriage and the shape of our redemption in Christ.

Now, perhaps we could say that changing the marriage canon to rule-in the marriage of same-sex couples maintains the core idea of Christian marriage, namely, mutual, covenant fidelity.

But at that point we run up against the sacramentality of marriage. In the sacraments, details matter. Jesus commanded us to recall his death by eating *bread*, by drinking *wine*, and by speaking particular *words* (“this is my body”; “this is my blood”). He commands us to baptize in water as we speak a particular *name* (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). These sacraments are signs, and these signs depend on their details for meaning. We know this, which is why we don’t substitute out the elements of the sacraments. If marriage is sacramental—and I believe that for we Anglicans it is—then making gender irrelevant within a revised marriage canon would involve us taking a kind of liberty with sacramental details that we don’t allow ourselves elsewhere.

This, I think, is the dilemma I feel most keenly. If we change the marriage canon in the way some of us are suggesting, we are in effect saying that *God has spoken in a largely misleading or unreliable way in the scriptures*—not just in the numerical and historical details that an inerrantist would fuss over, and not just in specific instructions about human sexuality, but in the broadest patterns and sacramental signs, in the very economy of meaning given to us in the scriptures. This should be a sobering move for any of us to make.

If we were to change Canon XXI in the way suggested

how would we be changing what marriage *means*?

would we therefore be claiming new freedom to re-signify the sacraments?

—most of all—what would we be saying about what it means to hear God in the scriptures—and what implications would that have for our *ongoing* ability to hear well?

I don’t think these questions are ‘merely’ theological; it seems to me they have everything to do with our debt to love God and neighbour. If love of God can’t finally be pulled apart from love of neighbour then neither can love of neighbour be pulled apart from loving God—and loving God, for Israel as for us, is always a matter of *hearing* and obeying. I’m concerned about our present and future to hear God speak in scripture if we make the theological moves implied in this proposal to change Canon XXI.

Respectfully submitted,

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