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Redefining Marriage?

a test for the church

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Introduction

The attempt to redefine marriage, through the introduction of so-called “same-sex marriage”, is an assault upon the Christian worldview. It has widespread implications for the understanding of marriage throughout society and poses a particular challenge for Christian churches which are likely to come under internal and external pressure to change their teaching on marriage in order to accommodate the prevailing secular-liberal worldview. Already there are those within the churches who are prepared either to solemnise same-sex “marriages” or to enter into such unions themselves. Such actions will inevitably lead to a crisis in some churches as disputes arise over whether and how to discipline those clergy whose actions run contrary to the official view of marriage within the relevant denomination. Faced with this challenge, the church needs to reaffirm the Christian understanding of marriage. Christians need to be reminded of biblical teaching about marriage, explore its significance with regard to the nature of God and His purpose in creation and examine the link made in Scripture between idolatry and same-sex sexual relationships. It is helpful also to be aware of the political ideology which lies behind attempts to redefine marriage and consider the spiritual basis of revisionist theology. This will equip faithful Christians to resist the temptation to compromise on the clear biblical teaching in this area.

The biblical view of marriage

The first two chapters of Genesis present marriage as an integral part of creation.¹ Marriage is initiated and defined by God. It does not originate from the initiative of human beings, but is an institution which is created for our benefit. God said: “Let us make man in our image ...”² In this statement God’s communicable and relational nature is evident. A conversation occurred within the Godhead which initiated the creation of humanity. The initiative in this act of creation rested with God alone. Humankind was the outcome of God’s creative Word. The Word generated the creation of humanity. It is Jesus Christ who is the author of life.³ Adam was not the creator of Eve. Rather they were both dependent upon and

¹ Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 2:15-25

² Genesis 1:26

³ John 1:1-3; Acts 3:15

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belonged to God. Similarly, all human beings are accountable to God for how we live our lives and for our inter-relationships with other people.

This accountability to God brings responsibility to relate well to others in society. Human beings are not wholly autonomous or self-defining, but are created to live in community. The family is the foundation of that community. Marriage is the central pillar of family life. It is the essential component of a good society. God said, "It is not good for man to be alone."⁴ This is the first time that something is described as being "not good". Until this point everything in creation has been described as being in essence "good" in nature. Now suddenly the concept of something which detracts from the full goodness of creation is introduced. This occurs prior to the Fall. It is not evil or sinful for Adam to be alone, but simply "not good." Jesus tells us that "No one is good except God alone."⁵ Goodness reflects God's character. The reason why it was not good for Adam to be alone is because, without Eve, Adam was unable to fulfil his vocation to display the image of God in creation.

Without Eve, Adam would not have been able to fulfil the will and purpose of God to "be fruitful and increase in number: fill the earth and subdue it".⁶ God's will is an expression of His nature and character. The purpose of marriage is for human companionship and procreation. Adam is created as a social being and, in conjunction with Eve, has the potential to procreate. They are created to live in relationship with God and in community with each other. They are able to share in God's creative work by producing children. These children have both physical bodies and eternal spirits. They are, therefore, distinct from the rest of creation. Adam and Eve are called to replicate God's act of creation by producing offspring who have the potential both to populate the earth and to enter into communion with God for eternity. As David says, we are created "a little lower than the heavenly beings", crowned with "glory and honour" and made rulers over the earth.⁷

Marriage between a man and a woman is intrinsic to the creation of humanity. Eve was created to be in relationship with Adam. They provide a model for future generations

of humanity. So Adam declares about Eve: "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."⁸ It is the "one flesh" nature of their relationship which is the primary characteristic of the marriage. It reflects both the diversity and unity of the Godhead. Only Eve is not made directly from the dust of the earth, but from Adam's donated rib. The single flesh of Adam, which was separated in the creation of Eve, is reunited through their marriage.

The "one flesh" description is demonstrated through the act of sexual intercourse. However, it is more than just an innuendo for sexual intercourse. It reflects the fundamental nature of marriage as being interdependent at the physical, emotional and spiritual levels. It refutes a dualistic understanding of human beings in which the actions of the body are considered in isolation from the spiritual dimension of life. There are two distinct and interdependent genders, both of which reflect aspects of God's nature. Our gender identity is not complete if it is experienced in isolation from those of the opposite sex. The two genders are intrinsic to the physical and the spiritual dimensions of our existence.⁹ They are fundamental to our created nature and human society.

This view of gender and marriage is endorsed by Jesus who restates not only the objective reality that God made two genders, but also that marriage between a man and a woman involves the creation of "one flesh" and a distinctive family unit which must not be separated by human intervention. Jesus confirms that it is God Himself who validates the marriage with his injunction that: "what God has joined together, let not man separate."¹⁰ Neither the church nor the state has the authority to redefine marriage to include two people of the same gender.

Marriage requires two distinct genders in order to reflect the image of God. Scripture states: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."¹¹ Adam and Eve

4 Genesis 2:18

5 Mark 10:18

6 Genesis 1:28

7 Psalm 8:5-6

8 Genesis 2:23-24

9 Torrance, D. J., "Understanding Marriage", in Torrance, D. W. & Stein, J. Embracing Truth: Homosexuality and the Word of God (Hansel Press, 2012), 106-107.

10 Mark 10:6-9

11 Genesis 1:27

together are described as being created in the image of God. There are not two autonomous gods, Baal and his consort Asherah. Rather there is one God whose image is contained in the distinctiveness and the complementarity of male and female. Men and women are created to live in relationship with God and with each other. True freedom is found in a fellowship which is characterised by love and self-sacrifice.¹² It is in this relational sense that we understand the image of God in humanity. Similarly, God can only be comprehended within the context of the Trinity. We cannot know Him in an abstract way or simply through intellectual knowledge. Nor can we know the Father, without also knowing the Son and the Holy Spirit. We bear the image of our Creator and we can only fulfil this vocation in reference to God.¹³ That vocation may take the form of marriage or celibacy. For those called to celibacy, the opportunity exists for wholehearted commitment to God.¹⁴ However, in both cases it involves submitting to the will of God for the expression of human sexuality.¹⁵

Love characterises our image-bearing vocation and is essential to the institution of marriage. The fact that God is love, and the source of love, is attested to throughout Scripture. We are instructed "...let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."¹⁶ Love does not stand in isolation, but must be set within the context of holiness. Without holiness, the desire to love and be loved degenerates into lust and pride. In a marriage two people make a covenant to be set apart from other sexual relationships and to be exclusively committed to the other person. It is only within this context that sexual intercourse is pure and without sin.

The Apostle Paul tells us, "Be imitators of God ... and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."¹⁷ Paul goes on to discuss marriage and instructs husbands, "Love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up

for her..."¹⁸ The ordered nature of God and His relationship with His people is evident. So wives are instructed, "Submit to your husbands as to the Lord" and Paul draws the parallel between Christ's headship of the church and a husband's headship of his wife.¹⁹ This structured relationship does not permit domestic abuse. The husband is not to treat his wife as a commodity, but rather is expected to sacrifice himself in order to promote her wellbeing.

The Apostle Peter endorses this view of marriage by encouraging Christian wives to have a gentle and quiet spirit. He links beauty of character on the part of Christian women with effective witness to the gospel. The respect given by Christian men to their wives facilitates communion with God and solicits a receptive response to prayer.²⁰ Peter's point is that, in Christ, the relationship between husband and wife is redeemed and the curse which befell relations between the genders after the Fall is undone.²¹ No longer need wives fear domination by their husbands, as was common in the ancient pagan world and remains the case in some societies today. Nor is death to be feared. Her husband must respect her as someone who is equal in possessing human dignity and a joint heir with him of eternal life. Both men and women can know God and relate with Him. This teaching on marriage contrasts with and challenges the strident nature of much of the modern feminist movement, but also rebukes misogyny and the objectification of women.

Paul encourages husbands and wives to meet the need for sexual intimacy of their spouse in order to counter the temptation to sexual immorality.²² The principle which underpins this injunction is that by entering into a marriage a degree of autonomy is sacrificed, reflecting the "one flesh" nature of the relationship. Neither party is completely independent from the other nor has absolute ownership over his or her body. There is both unity and diversity within the relationship. It is a relationship of mutual love in which two people sacrifice their own preferences in order to exist as one unit.²³ So the relationship within the Godhead is

¹² Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics Vol III, Part IV* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1961), 116.

¹³ Torrance, D. J., *op cit*, 104-106.

¹⁴ Matthew 19: 11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:1 and 7:32-33

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:8-9

¹⁶ 1 John 4:7-8

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:1

¹⁸ Ephesians 5:25

¹⁹ Ephesians 5:22-24

²⁰ 1 Peter 3:1-7

²¹ Genesis 3:16; Revelation 22:3

²² 1 Corinthians 7:1-5

²³ Paul's teaching does not justify marital rape as the consent and decision-making of both husband and wife are needed.

one of both unity and diversity and is characterised by love and self-giving.

The unity of God's nature was revealed to the Israelites in the injunction: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You are to love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength."²⁴ This response of absolute self-giving is one which was exemplified by Christ himself. In order to fulfil God's purpose of salvation and redemption, Jesus submitted to the will of the Father and was obedient even to the point of death. He was subsequently exalted to the highest place and to Him all creation will submit. This brings glory to God the Father because Jesus and the Father are one.²⁵ The words and work of Jesus are the words and work of the Father.²⁶

Marriage reveals God's relational nature and His purpose for creation. That purpose is to call to Himself a people who will dwell and commune with Him eternally. As marriage is intended to be permanent and indissoluble, it provides an analogy of God's eternal relationship with His people. This explains the strong line which Jesus takes on divorce.²⁷ In the Old Testament, Israel's worship of the gods of the surrounding pagan peoples is compared to an act of adultery.²⁸ In the New Testament, the church is presented as the faithful bride of Christ.²⁹ Moreover, we are told that God will dwell with His people. The original relationship which existed between God and mankind is restored and will last for eternity. God has made a covenant to love and redeem His people. Like marriage, it is a relationship which is indissoluble. God is faithful. It is the essence of His nature.³⁰ He will remain committed to the church forever.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4

²⁵ Philippians 2:6-11

²⁶ John 14:9-11

²⁷ Mark 10:1-12.

²⁸ This is exemplified in the book of Hosea. Gomer, Hosea's adulterous wife, is analogous of the nation's unfaithfulness. The relationship breaks down, but subsequently Hosea is reconciled with Gomer. In a parallel with his personal life, God uses Hosea to pronounce judgement upon the Israelites, but also to declare a promise of future restoration.

²⁹ Revelation 21:1-4

³⁰ Romans 3:3-4; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Timothy 2:13

Idolatry

It is against this background that we should consider the issue of homosexuality and the challenge posed by those who advocate the redefinition of marriage. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul associated same-sex relationships with idolatry.³¹ The Gentiles had rejected the revelation of God found in creation and projected their own image on to God through Greek and other mythology. This temptation to project our own image on to God, rather than reflect His image in creation, is one that befalls all humanity.³² Relational disruption of the image of God follows and God surrenders us to the consequences of worshipping the image we have chosen and its associated sin.³³ Thus the pagan Gentile societies of the ancient world were handed over in divine judgement to the consequences of their rebellion. That judgement consisted of the abandonment of natural sexual relations in marriage and replacement by homosexual and lesbian activity, often, but not exclusively, associated with cult prostitution. As Robert Gagnon states:

"The power of Paul's argument lies precisely in its simplicity: if one disregards the book of Leviticus and asks oneself what clues existing in nature might aid in discerning the Creator's will for sexual expression, then human anatomy and procreative function comprise the most unambiguous indicators of divine intent.

*"... along with idolatry, same sex intercourse represents one of the clearest instances of conscious suppression of revelation in nature by gentiles, inasmuch as it involves denying clear anatomical gender differences and functions ..."*³⁴

This judgement should not be considered as the act of a vengeful god seeking retribution on those who disregard his law, but rather within the context of God's love, mercy and holiness. The Gentile societies of the ancient world were not destroyed, but rather preserved for the time in history when God's promise to Abraham that the Gentiles would be blessed would come to fulfilment through the

³¹ Romans 1:18-27.

³² Romans 2:1

³³ Torrance D.J., op cit, 108.

³⁴ Gagnon, R. A. J., *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2001), 264.

preaching of the gospel. Paul's commission, received directly from the Lord, was to turn the Gentiles from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. He did this by preaching the need for repentance and exhorting them to demonstrate their faith in the actions of their bodies.³⁵ Paul told the Areopagus in Athens that God had in the past overlooked the ignorance which led to idolatry, but now "commands all people everywhere to repent".³⁶ He rejected a dualistic view of life, as evidenced by his instruction to Roman Christians not to offer their bodies to sin, but rather as "instruments of righteousness" and "as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" in a "spiritual act of worship".³⁷ Moreover, Peter stated that it is not God's will that any person should perish but that all should come to repentance.³⁸

By giving human societies over to what is evidently contrary to creation, God allows human beings to see (if only we are willing to look) how ridiculous it is to reject divine revelation and the fruitlessness of idol worship. The male and female bodies are designed to be physically compatible with each other for the purpose of procreation. In contrast, same-sex sexual relationships cannot produce children by natural means. Similarly only in relationship with Jesus Christ can spiritual life be generated within a person.³⁹ Eternal life is not merely living forever (for all humans have an everlasting soul), but rather it is to know God the Father and to know the Son.⁴⁰ It is an intimate relationship with God. Worship of idols does not produce spiritual life. It is sterile and results in spiritual death. Similarly, a society which does not reproduce will become extinct. Jesus Christ does not impose Himself on those who refuse to submit to His Lordship, but those who are unwilling to repent of sin cannot enjoy eternal communion with a holy God.⁴¹

Idolatry takes the form of rejecting God's will and supplanting it with our own will and desires as the driving force of our lives. God's will is evident in the very nature of humanity. The two genders bear testimony to God's purpose for humanity and this is summed up in the commands given to

Adam. He was commanded to eat of any tree in the Garden of Eden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and to go forth and multiply, to "fill the earth and subdue it" and to have dominion over every living creature.⁴² These commands remain applicable to human society today. We have a responsibility to submit to the moral law of God, to live in community and to steward the resources of the earth for the common good. We are not wholly self-defining or isolated from God and other people. Rather we are to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.⁴³ We are to fulfil God's vocation for our lives within our created gender. We are dependent upon and complement the opposite gender. We understand and accept the limits of our creaturely nature. Our identity is found in relationship with our Creator and by operating within the parameters which He has set in creation.

To engage in idolatry is to seek to operate in isolation from God and to exceed the moral boundaries of the created order. It denies the integrated nature of the human person, created as both body and soul, and adopts a dualistic worldview in which the actions of the body have no eternal significance. It tempts people to engage in sexual immorality, believing that we are no longer accountable to a holy God, but only to our own subjective creation which reflects our own image. In place of relationship with God, identity is sought in our sexuality. Gender identity is elevated to the place of the Almighty God. We seek to arbitrate on what is good and evil. Yet it is God's prerogative to determine what is right or wrong, good or evil. To think that we have that authority is profoundly arrogant. Such pride was the sin of Adam and Sodom and has been replicated in human societies throughout history.⁴⁴

It remains the case today that an idolatrous society will come under the judgement of God. God allows such a society to reap the inevitable consequences of setting aside His Word. Our society is on this trajectory. For the last fifty years sex has been increasingly disconnected from marriage. We have seen a huge increase in the number of divorces, cohabitation has become the norm for the non-Christian population and there has been an explosion in single parenthood with 52% of children

35 Acts 26:18-20

36 Acts 17:30

37 Romans 6:12-13; Romans 12:1

38 2 Peter 3:9

39 John 14:6; Acts 4:12

40 John 17:3

41 1 Corinthians 6:9; Revelation 22:15

42 Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:17

43 Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:29-31

44 Ezekiel 16:49; Romans 1:22

born today in Scotland being born out of wedlock. The increasing acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships and promotion of a radical homosexual rights agenda since the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999 are evidence of a society which is fundamentally idolatrous in nature. Pressure to exclude the Christian faith from the public life of our nation, including the definition of marriage, is a further example of a society in which worship of idols has become the norm. These idols are varied in nature, but some of the most prominent are a belief in the absolute autonomy of the individual, materialism and a relativistic understanding of truth.

Ideology

Idolatry finds one expression in the sexual liberation ideology. The notion of marriage as a public good had been challenged by Karl Marx in 1848 in the Communist Manifesto. This view was rearticulated during the 1960s by radical thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse, who expected that sexual liberation would result from successful Marxist revolution.⁴⁵ Based on this philosophical foundation, the feminist movement argued that marriage was a patriarchal institution which needed to be radically reformed or scrapped altogether. This critique was adopted also by those who initiated the drive for homosexual equality. It was claimed that marriage and the family were at the heart of the oppression of those with a homosexual inclination. The objective was to abolish marriage and the family, overturn the gender role system and usher in cultural and social revolution.⁴⁶

Such a materialistic view of the world constitutes a new civic religion and is the prevailing ideology of current Western society. The new religion emphasises sexual liberation as a means to fulfilling personal identity. Traditional social and cultural restraints on sexual expression are to be removed by government. Healthy sexual relationships are viewed as those which provide mutual benefits to those involved and based solely on open communication and intimacy.⁴⁷ They need not be exclusive to two persons,

45 Morgan, P., *Children as Trophies?: Examining the evidence on same-sex parenting* (The Christian Institute, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2002), 28.

46 Torrance, D. J., "Same sex relations: some theological pointers", in Torrance, D. W. & Stein, J. op cit, 119-120.

47 Giddens, A., *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives* (Profile Books, London, 2000), 61.

heterosexual, life-long, or orientated towards God's purpose for human sexuality. Self-gratification, rather than the procreation of children, is the ultimate objective. Duty, obligation and covenant are absent. The eternal purpose of God is disregarded and replaced with the secular and temporal objectives of the individuals concerned. Diversity of sexuality and family structure is promoted. A moral relativism is predominant in which no particular form of family structure can be held to be superior to any other. The proponents of the new social libertarianism argue that marriage should receive no privileged treatment in law or government policy. This is despite the sociological evidence showing that marriage provides the most stable and best context for raising children, with better educational, health and emotional outcomes than single parenthood.⁴⁸

The aim of those advocating this ideology is to undermine heterosexual monogamous marriage as a societal norm. Many in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights movement subscribe to the doctrine of "heterosexism", arguing that the heterosexual norm in society is responsible for homophobia and that it must be eliminated. At the international level, persistent attempts are made by radical groups and many Western states to have LGBT rights and abortion incorporated in UN treaties and forced upon developing countries. This new form of cultural imperialism is central also to the UK's aid and foreign policy priorities.

The materialistic sexual liberation ideology, whatever the nominal religious affiliation of some of its proponents, in practice rejects the Christian worldview and understanding of history. No consideration is given to God's revelation of Himself in creation, marriage as the only appropriate context for sexual intercourse and the divinely ordained remit of humanity to procreate and populate the world. Nor is the significance of the incarnation and Christ's forthcoming return as King of kings and Lord of lords considered. It is either atheistic or assumes a deity who is uninterested in the affairs of humanity. It rejects marriage as the only appropriate context for sexual relationships, promotes population control and emphasises control of fertility over the celebration of new life. It presumes that the earth is the ultimate source of organic life, denies

48 The Centre for Social Justice, *Every Family Matters: An in-depth review of family law in Britain*, (London, Second Edition, 2010), 57.

original sin and the need for a saviour and concludes that human history need have no imminent end. A new global political order, superseding the nation-state, appears to be the ultimate goal. The justification put forward is to tackle problems such as climate change, poverty and gender discrimination at the international level. For the proponents of such radical agendas, religion and traditional family structures are viewed as a hindrance to economic development and human freedom in poorer countries.⁴⁹ It is a view which is anti-eschatological, relativistic and based on post-Enlightenment and Marxist concepts that rational understanding of the world allows humanity to shape history and control the future.

The principal international human rights documents uphold the central role of the family in society. This view features in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was drawn up in 1948. It has been reaffirmed in subsequent international declarations of human rights. However, the language of “reproductive health” has been included also in some recent United Nations (UN) documents. There is no international consensus among nation states as to how such language should be interpreted, but there is pressure on governments and UN agencies to interpret this phrase to include a right to access abortion services. More recently a new terminology of “sexual and reproductive health rights” has emerged.⁵⁰ The incorporation of this terminology into new international treaties would provide a basis for the advocates of the sexual liberation ideology to argue for the redefinition of marriage. Pressure would be applied for all nation states to enshrine access to abortion and “same-sex marriage” within domestic laws. Those developing countries which refused to do so would be accused of failing to meet their international obligations and might find difficulty in accessing international aid.

The advocates of the prevailing materialistic sexual liberation ideology are seeking to use the UN to impose abortion and “same-sex marriage” on the whole world. Accompanying this attempt, the UN is being influenced by a movement which seeks to create a new global political order. Syncretistic in nature and characterised by a confluence of liberal Catholic and eastern mysticism, its vision is of a global political order based on the Golden

Rule in which we treat others as we would wish to be treated ourselves.⁵¹ However, the Golden Rule cannot be divorced from the law of God or divine image in humanity as expressed in two distinct genders and marriage. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord instructs us to treat others as we would wish to be treated ourselves and teaches that this sums up the law and the prophets.⁵² He states that none of the law will be discarded until the Kingdom of God comes to fulfilment.⁵³ It is impossible, therefore, to keep the Golden Rule whilst breaking the commandments of God. By destroying human life in the womb, rejecting marriage as defined by God and engaging in alternative sexual behaviour, we act in rebellion against God, disobey His commands and seek to frustrate the Lord’s purpose in creation.

The Challenge for the Church

The challenge for the church is to remain faithful to Christ within the context of increasing pressure to abandon the biblical teaching on marriage and same-sex sexual relationships. It is to resist the temptation to bend to the tide of modern secular culture. It is a pressure which is being felt at both a global and local level. Within Scotland, such pressure is likely to intensify following the Scottish Parliament’s decision to introduce ‘same-sex marriage’. There is an increased prospect of the civil law being cited by Christian denominations to justify altering their teaching on marriage to include same-sex sexual relationships.⁵⁴

This pressure is exemplified by recent decisions of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland with regard to same-sex relationships and the ministry. In 2014, the General Assembly approved the Ministers and Deacons in Civil Partnerships Overture which allows individual congregations to depart from the church’s official position on the incompatibility of active same-sex sexual relationships with the ministry. If the presbyteries endorse the Overture, a report will be brought to a future General Assembly on

⁵¹ This movement is very influential in the UN-associated Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) network. It has a role in shaping the outcome documents of the UN Department of Public Information’s NGO conferences based on the principles of ‘Interspirituality’.

⁵² Matthew 7:12

⁵³ Matthew 5:18.

⁵⁴ In the longer term the civil law may even be used to force recalcitrant denominations to fall into line or risk losing their charitable status.

⁴⁹ Giddens A., op. cit, 65.

⁵⁰ It has been proposed by a coalition of largely European countries that this language be included in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

whether or not “same-sex marriage” should be recognised as equivalent to civil partnership in relation to the Overture. Assuming an affirmative response, which is probable owing to the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, the Church of Scotland is likely to agree that entering into a “same-sex marriage” does not necessarily bar a person from parish ministry.⁵⁵ The Church of Scotland would accept, in effect, the redefinition of marriage for those congregations which wish to do so.

Ostensibly the disagreement within the Church of Scotland about the compatibility of active same-sex sexual behaviour with the Christian life rests upon differing approaches to the interpretation of Scripture. Those coming from a revisionist perspective argue that Scripture should be interpreted and applied within a contextual framework and ask how the biblical writers would have applied the gospel within the modern context.⁵⁶ Moreover, they argue that a loving God would not create people with a homosexual inclination and deny the opportunity to express those feelings in physical sexual intimacy. This biblical hermeneutic is spiritually dangerous because it allows extra-biblical subjective experience, personal desires and the political context of the day to become the prism through which we interpret the Word of God.⁵⁷ It is to project our own image on to God, rather than to subject our understanding of gender and sexuality to God’s revelation of Himself through creation.

The desire to set aside the Word of God is not only a modern phenomenon. It is the characteristic of any society intent on replacing divine revelation with human customs. Jesus confronted this phenomenon when He criticised the Pharisees for rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep their tradition. He summarised their problem by quoting Isaiah: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See Church of Scotland General Assembly 2014: Assembly Papers, Friday 23rd May available at www.gapublications.co.uk/publication/friday-white-paper-2014.

⁵⁶ There are two lines of revisionist argument. First that the modern phenomenon of life-long same-sex partnerships was unknown to the biblical authors and is not condemned in Scripture. Second that with the widespread acceptance of sexual orientation as an inherent human characteristic, such partnerships are of equal value to marriage and should be blessed by the Church.

⁵⁷ It was this approach to Scripture which enabled a significant proportion of the German church during the 1930s to argue that Jesus was not Jewish but an Aryan and that Hitler was the manifestation of Christ’s second coming for the German people at that point in history.

⁵⁸ Mark 7:6-9; Isaiah 29:13.

Similarly, the early church encountered the Gnostic heresy which included a dualistic understanding of the human person, denial of the incarnation and sexual immorality.⁵⁹ It was early Gnosticism which was described by the Apostle John as the spirit of the Antichrist.⁶⁰

This is more than just a matter of historical interest. Heresy often starts from a desire to accommodate the cultural norms of secular society in order to make the gospel more palatable to those outside the church.⁶¹ This is the rationale used by some people to argue that same-sex sexual relationships should be accepted within the church. Moreover, David Torrance identifies a modern form of Gnosticism as underpinning the current moves within Christian churches to accept ‘same-sex marriage’. He states:

“We can only promote same sex relations as equivalent to marriage if we abolish any ultimate distinctions between male and female and attribute little theological value to the human body.

“These attempts at the redefinition of what it means to be human are ultimately disastrous for Christology and the central affirmations of the Christian gospel – in particular the incarnation and the atonement. They promote a ‘container view’ of the human person, in which the ‘authentic individual’ somehow inhabits a physical body which has no ultimate relevance. When this is applied to Christ it means that his physical body was of no real importance, or that the Son of God never properly became human.”⁶²

Gnosticism has reappeared throughout human history. It is characterised by the existence of a governing “enlightened” elite, refusal to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ,

⁵⁹ The Gnostics held to the view that a distinction should be drawn between the physical and spiritual realms. The material world was viewed as being inherently evil whilst the spiritual realm consisted of a mixture of good and evil spirits. Influenced by secular Greek culture and eastern mystery cults, one strand of Gnosticism argued that it mattered little what a person did with his body and that what was important was to obtain spiritual enlightenment through mystical teachings. The incarnation of Christ and His humanity were denied. Sexual immorality was practised, as within the dualist understanding of some Gnostics there was no need for holiness in lifestyle. All that mattered was spiritual enlightenment.

⁶⁰ 1 John 4: 2-3

⁶¹ McGrath, A., Heresy (SPCK, London, 2009), 181.

⁶² Torrance, D. J., op cit, 117.

rejection of the law of God and a desire to control human history.⁶³ A new presentation of this spirit is to be observed in our generation. Moves to depart from biblical teaching on the acceptability of same-sex sexual behaviour and to accommodate the sexual rights agenda are the revival of this perennial heresy which has beset the church over the centuries. Same-sex sexual relationships are an idolatrous parody of marriage in which the image of God is distorted by an aspiration to be a “god” and to define the moral law ourselves. Christians who wish to remain true to Jesus Christ cannot ascribe moral equivalence to these two distinct types of relationship. The choice is whether to remain faithful to the Lord or to succumb to heresy and apostasy.

Submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ historically was a fundamental part of Scottish national identity. In 1560, the Reformation Parliament committed Scotland to reformed Christianity. In 1638, Scotland became a nation which was covenanted to serve Jesus Christ in perpetuity. The National Covenant was signed by the political leaders of the nation and by leadership of the national church. In 1999, the renewed Scottish Parliament reneged on that covenant and betrayed our heritage. Prompted by representatives of the Church of Scotland and Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS), its first decision was to deny the absolute authority of Christ by rejecting the Westminster model of exclusively Christian prayers and adopting a multifaith Time for Reflection. In an act of self-idolatry, the Scottish Parliament has sought now to adopt God’s prerogative to define marriage.⁶⁴

Although church attendance is low in contemporary Scotland in comparison to historic levels, a cultural memory of Christianity and its social values has survived in wider society. It is this cultural memory which is now under threat, including society’s understanding of marriage.⁶⁵ Additionally, the redefinition of marriage in civil law exerts pressure within the Church of Scotland and other denominations to bow before the spirit of the age by setting aside biblical teaching and accepting same-sex sexual relationships as morally equivalent to marriage.

⁶³ Recent historical examples of its reappearance were Nazism and Communism.

⁶⁴ The UK Parliament has acted in the same manner for England and Wales.

⁶⁵ Rivers, J., *Redefining Marriage: the case for caution* (Cambridge papers, Vol 21, No 3, September 2012), 6.

The temptation is to acquiesce with this spirit in order to maintain the institutional unity of the Church of Scotland or other denominations. However, for those seeking wisdom on the way forward, the words of John Knox ring down the centuries:

“... you ... may lawfully require ... that they provide for you true preachers and that they expel such as under the names of pastors devour and destroy the flock ... And if in this point your superiors be negligent ... you may provide true teachers for yourselves...”

“And if you think that you are innocent, because you are not the chief actors of such iniquity, you are utterly deceived. For God does not only punish the chief offenders, but with them does he damn the consenters to iniquity (Rom 1:32); and all are judged to consent, who, knowing (the) impiety committed, give no testimony that the same displeases them.”⁶⁶

Knox’s injunction is as applicable to contemporary Scotland as it was in the 16th Century. His warning may be even more applicable to our society than it was to his own, as Paul’s statement, to which Knox refers, includes those who gave public approval to the same-sex relationships which followed from the rejection of divine revelation.⁶⁷ Within Scotland, there is a concerted attempt to eliminate the remaining cultural legacy of the Christian worldview. The Christian cultural legacy is being supplanted, often with government connivance, with worldviews based on other faiths, religious syncretism, secular humanism and neo-paganism.⁶⁸ Those who uphold the Christian understanding of marriage and are unwilling to endorse its redefinition will come under increasing pressure as Scottish society becomes more hostile to the Christian worldview. That may involve loss of employment, marginalisation in public life or removal of charitable status for Christian

⁶⁶ Knox, J., *Letter to the Commonality of Scotland*, 1558, available at www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/itrcommo.htm.

⁶⁷ Romans 1:32

⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that two groups which responded in disproportionately large numbers to a recent survey which was sponsored by the Scottish Government’s Equality Unit were secular humanists and Pagans. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that 59% of respondents to the survey supported the right of same-sex couples to adopt children and 51% supported the right of same-sex couples to ‘marry’ in a religious place of worship. See www.faihandbeliefsotland.co.uk.

organisations which are unwilling to sign up to the state-defined 'equality' agenda. Some churches and ministers will become apostate. Others will maintain a faithful witness to the truth. Remaining faithful to Christ may involve loss of access to church buildings and manses. Alternatively, it will involve a hard fight to maintain biblical truth within some Christian denominations. Those who desire to remain faithful to Jesus Christ are called to proclaim the truth in love, to rejoice in suffering and patiently to await the return of the Lord.⁶⁹ The church needs to rediscover a sense of expectation of the Lord's return. The kings of the earth may for a limited time give their power to the Antichrist,⁷⁰ but Jesus Christ is coming back soon. He returns to judge the nations, to rule on the earth and as the Bridegroom of the church. Marriage bears witness to the fact that the Kingdom of God will last forever.

⁶⁹ 2 Timothy 4: 1-5; Romans 5:3-4; 2 Timothy 3:12; James 5: 7-8; Matthew 5: 10-12; Romans 5:3-5

⁷⁰ Revelation 17:12-13