

Theological and Scriptural Issues

Relating to the Proposed Changes to the Marriage Canon: A Summary

Prepared by the Diocese of Huron Marriage Canon Task Force

May 2017: Synod members engaged in conversations about the proposed changes to the Marriage Canon. The current Marriage Canon permits marriage between a man and a woman. The proposed changes would permit marriage of same-sex couples.

Synod members asked for a concise and simple summary of theological and biblical teachings about marriage and the proposed changes to the Marriage Canon. This brief summary is a response to those requests.

For a fuller discussion please refer to *This Holy Estate: The Report of the Commission on the Marriage Canon of the Anglican Church of Canada*. The report can be found at: www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/Marriage_Canon_REPORT_15Sept22.pdf

The Authority of Scripture as Interpreted in the Anglican Tradition

There are different views within Anglicanism about the authority of scripture and how we are to read and understand scripture. This can lead to differing views about same-sex relationships and the proposed changes to the marriage canon. For example:

- For some Anglicans, Scripture is the literal and clear word of God, eternal and unchanging. Certain texts in the bible can be seen as proof that God condemns sexual activity with someone of the same sex.
- For other Anglicans, Scripture is bound up in its historical context and ought not to be taken literally outside of these contexts. Current cultural understandings of same-sex relationships need to be considered with the principles of Scripture.
- *This Holy Estate* argues that neither of these views is adequate. The report encourages us to understand that while “Scripture bears the final authority for the church, it does not do so apart from its interpretation and application.” Scripture must be engaged with by the community as well as individually.

Six Bible passages refer to sexual activity with someone of the same sex:

- Genesis 19.4-5; Leviticus 18.22; 20.13; Romans 1.26-27; 1 Corinthians 6.9-11; 1 Timothy 1.10.
- *This Holy Estate* encourages us to interpret these six passages in the wider context of Scripture as a whole rather than reading them in isolation. The interpretation of these passages is neither clear nor straightforward.
- For example, *This Holy Estate* indicates that most scholars agree that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is principally about the rules of hospitality.
- The report also notes that other scholars argue that committed and exclusive same-sex relationships were unknown in biblical times and point out that the condemnation of homosexual activity in the New Testament passages is in the context of other practices seen as contrary to societal and cultural norms.

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The Anglican Understanding of Christian Marriage

This Holy Estate argues that biblical and theological tradition includes two principal understandings of marriage; only in the second of these are same-sex relationships permissible:

- One, grounded in biblical creation accounts, celebrates heterosexual love as God's gift of companionship and means of human procreation;
- The second sees a broader view of marriage as an exclusive covenant of God's love, grounded in biblical redemption.

The Anglican understanding of marriage, as expressed in the *Book of Common Prayer*, *The Book of Alternative Services*, and in the canons ("rules") of the Church is as a union of faithful love, to exclusion of all others, until death.

- The purposes of marriage are mutual support, fellowship and comfort, and procreation.
- There is an aspect of discipleship in marriage. Marriage looks back towards God's covenant with humanity and looks forward towards new creation and the renewal and reorientation of all things, including marriage, towards Jesus Christ.

Christian marriage is understood as a commitment and a covenant.

- The marriage covenant reflects God's covenant with Israel and reflects the "mystery of Christ and the Church," whereby He is the groom and the Church His bride.
- The marriage covenant is also a sign of the mystery of Christ's incarnation and of His love for His body, the Church (Eph. 5.25-32).
- As a covenant, it requires a commitment of the whole self and carries specific obligations between the parties. It mirrors God's faithfulness to both creation and Church by demonstrating faithfulness, justice, mercy, love, and sacrificial self-giving.
- Christian marriage is expressed in covenantal vows made before God, which, in the minds of some Anglicans, makes it a sacrament.
- *This Holy Estate* reasons that there would appear to be no basis for why such a commitment or covenant could not be made between two men or two women as well.

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What is “Natural”?

This Holy Estate indicates that arguments against same-sex relationships on the basis of natural law can be seen as problematic for two reasons.

- First, scientific, sociological, and cultural research into gender and sexuality has deepened our understanding of what is innate (“nature”) and what is developed or chosen (“nurture”). There is a wide consensus that some people are born with an unchangeable attraction to their own sex.
- Second, there are numerous examples of other scriptural injunctions which are now disregarded because they are correctly now understood as being culturally bound (such as women keeping silent in churches or prohibitions against cutting one’s hair).

When the Letter to the Romans speaks of certain activities as being “contrary to nature,” this does not necessarily mean “sinful.” The same Greek phrase is used later in the same book to speak of God’s grace in grafting the Gentiles (“contrary to nature”) as a “wild olive branch” on to the cultivated tree (“natural branches”) of Israel (Rom 11.17, 21). (The adoption or grafting in of a group formerly outside the main body does not invalidate the earlier covenant nor is it necessarily done on exactly the same terms as before, e.g., the need to keep Torah.)

For people exclusively oriented towards their own sex, an “opposite sex” relationship is “contrary to [their] nature.”

The Doctrine of Creation

In Genesis we read that God created the heavens and the earth and all that it is in it, “and it was good.” God created human beings in God’s image. God’s image is not sexually differentiated—both men and women bear it equally—and as a result it is all of humanity that is responsible for filling the earth.

- As noted above, there is a consensus amongst researchers that some portion of human beings are sexually attracted to other people of the same sex and that this primary identity cannot be changed. In other words: they were created this way by God.
- Others dispute this view and argue that homosexuality is a consequence of the fallen nature of human beings, beginning with Adam and Eve, and therefore is always a sin.
- These two positions are essentially irreconcilable.

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General Synod 2004 affirmed the sanctity of same-sex people and relationships as a fundamental aspect of human identity: as something created by God and which is therefore, by definition, “good.”