

Some reflections from Headway Ireland (Methodist Evangelicals Together) on “Human sexuality and same-sex marriage”

We include three presentations here on this subject. The members of *Headway (Ireland)* were assisted by Rev Dr Malcolm Duncan whom we invited to speak to us on the subject “Why we believe the bible teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman.” Our thinking was further focussed when we gave a presentation to the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church in Ireland. The following abbreviated notes summarise our deliberations and we hope they will be a helpful guide in the secular moral maze.

Human sexuality and same-sex marriage (presentation 1)

Our Views

We would describe ourselves as holding to the traditional teaching of the Church with regard to human sexuality and marriage. We believe in the creation norm as set out in Genesis – that male and female together were made to reflect the image of God, that woman was created as a suitable companion for man and that in the marriage of one man and one woman the two become one flesh. The Bible begins by stating the binary principle that heaven and earth, day and night, land and sea, male and female are made for each other. The union of heaven and earth is compared to the wedding of male and female.

We believe that marriage is more than just a social contract or arrangement. It is a picture of the union of Christ and His Church and as such it is, for Christians, something which borders on the sacramental. For two thousand years the Christian Church has held it in honour and defined it as the union of one man and one woman. We are aware of an attempt to change culture through the changing of its language.

Homophobia is wrong. We understand that some appear to have been born with same sex attraction. It is how they are. We do not in any way imply that homosexual orientation is of itself sinful but we do hold that the physical expression of it is something condemned in unambiguous terms in both Old and New Testaments. The Bible teaches that sex is much more than a merely physical act. We understand that it is very hard to advocate a life of enforced celibacy but we would point out that it is a time honoured path in Christian history. Contrary to the views of modern secular society, full sexual expression is not the be- all- and- end -all of human fulfilment. Consider the Lord Jesus Himself. Consider also the many women in our congregations who serve God faithfully in the single and celibate state – not through choice but because realistically their chances of finding a similarly committed man are greatly reduced due to the marked gender imbalance in our church.

We recognise that gay people often feel excluded from church life and experience great hurt. We repent of this. We need to find ways to welcome all and especially to support those who “have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven”. What we cannot do is to approve of openly sexual relationships within church life particularly when it comes to leadership of any kind.

Recent years have witnessed a seismic shift in popular opinion with regard to the acceptability of same sex relationships. Westminster and Dail Eireann have moved to redefine marriage to include those of the same gender. This has put the Church in a very difficult position. Do we go along with the changing norms of society, possibly seeing divine leading in current popular opinion? Do we acquiesce in moral change in order to be pastorally relevant or do we stand apart?

It is never comfortable or easy to attempt to stand against the tide. We deplore the sad fact that many people today are not only negative but openly hostile to Christianity because they wrongly see us as homophobic and bigoted. We have been boxed into a corner. The easiest thing would be to so major on God's love and grace for all that we lose hold on what God teaches in his word. God is Holy Love. The Church is at a crossroads. Do we draw our morality from society or do we attempt to speak a word from God into that society? Do we, to quote Tim Keller, "become changed by the culture or challenge it?"

Our Concerns

Headway members and those for whom we speak are deeply concerned about how our church could go on this issue. We note the use of the so called Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a basis for procedure. We would be very anxious about any attempt to elevate "experience" to as important a place as scripture in any deliberations. In our view scripture must always stand supreme while tradition, experience and reason serve only as tools to help us interpret it. In our view scripture is very plain on this matter. Efforts to reinterpret it in a pro- gay direction have not proved convincing in any way to our members.

At the moment our Church upholds traditional teaching and Headway (Ireland) will resist any "softening up" process underway in the denomination with regard to the legitimacy of sexual acts between people of the same gender. We will oppose any shift in the church's traditional teaching on human sexuality and marriage. Numbers of our most committed ministers, local preachers, leaders and active members may well leave if our church departs from Scriptural teaching. This is not said by way of threat but as a serious warning which should be taken seriously. Already the "stay or go" debate is one that deeply exercises many of our members. The argument to **stay** says that if we walk out we abandon the church we love and in whose ethos we have been nurtured and we will lose any ability to influence it. The argument to **walk** away says that a church that condones what God in His word condemns, is an apostate church and involves us in moral compromise beyond what our conscience can bear.

Human sexuality and same-sex marriage (presentation 2)

Traditional Methodist teaching

Headway (Ireland) supports the traditional Methodist Church teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman. We repent of homophobia. We seek to be active for inclusion,

equality and tolerance but do not condone immorality and behaviour which is contrary to biblical revelation.

Committed to the Bible

“The doctrines of the evangelical faith, which Methodism has held from the beginning, and still holds, are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.”

(The Constitution of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Section 2, Statement of Belief)

We need to be careful that the re-interpretation of the scriptures does not become a re-definition of scriptural authority.

Complementarity of the sexes

Human beings are made both male and female and are created in the image of God for sexual, emotional and social interdependence.

“So God created mankind on 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.’” (Genesis 1v 27,28).

Whether we are single or married, widowed or divorced, we are made for interaction with the opposite gender and each needs the other. The word “sex” in comes from the Latin root “split” which gives truth to the phrase “my other half.” “It is not good for a man to be alone.” (Genesis 2v18.)

As human beings, male and female complement each other for mental stimulation, social growth and spiritual growth. Our different genders bring with them sexual union and spiritual closeness. According to Bible teaching, sexual union is more than a physical act and the “one flesh” has a spiritual dimension to it. (See 1 Corinthians 6v18-20; Ephesians 5v31,32.)

Sexual boundaries

Sexual preferences do not define us but they do matter both personally and spiritually. Jesus was completely fulfilled without being sexually active. Jesus affirmed sex and kept it within its protective moral boundaries.

This teaching is further developed in the New Testament. While sex is good because God created it, pre-marital sex and homosexual practice are contrary to God’s plan.

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.”

(1 Thessalonians 4v3-6)

Same gender relationships

Sexual preference is portrayed in scripture as a basic choice. The “gay gene” theory is as yet scientifically unproven. The following verses speak plainly about same gender relationships: Romans 1v26,27; 1 Corinthians 6v9,10; 1 Timothy 1v9,10. We are responsible before God for our own behaviour.

Does the Bible not change its attitudes to societal customs?

From Genesis to Revelation, the language and tone of scripture does not change in its description of sexual practice. It progresses in its language around the role of women, the role of slaves, and food regulations, but it does not change its language about the issue of sexuality and sexual practice. Sexual relations are designed to be practised between a man (husband) and woman (wife). Christians are neither at liberty to re-define scripture nor to do what we like. Jesus spoke about taking up our cross and denying ourselves to follow him (Matthew 16v24.) Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery “Neither do I condemn you, go and leave your life of sin” (John 8v11.) Do we welcome people of same-sex attraction? Yes we do and we support them, and all, in following Christ.

Re-definition of marriage

The Methodist Church does not accept the re-definition of marriage to include same-sex couples. Our church does not officiate at gay marriages nor can we bless what God condemns.

Human sexuality and same-sex marriage (presentation 3)

The following article appeared in The Methodist Newsletter and is a report on the Headway lecture, Spring 2015.

Pastor Malcolm Duncan, originally from Newtownabbey and now pastor of Gold Hill Baptist church, spoke at the Headway (Ireland) lecture in Seymour St. Lisburn church on 24 April 2015. He is heavily involved in a charity named ‘Church & Community’, reflecting his conviction that the Church must engage with modern culture. He spoke on the Biblical understanding of Marriage and critiqued the recent approval of same-sex marriage in Britain.

The main points of interest were that behaviour must always be judged by the clear teaching of Jesus and the entire Bible. Recent debate, following the legalization of Same-sex marriage in Britain and the Republic of Ireland, has centred on the assertion that Christians should modernise their attitude to same-sex relationships and permit homosexual marriage just as we have changed our attitude to slavery and the unequal treatment of women in society. But while there has been a clear development of thinking within Scripture regarding Slavery and the equal place of women in society, there has not been any change from Genesis to Revelation about the acceptance of marriage being other than between one man and one woman

While considering textual interpretation the distinction between Exegesis and Eisegesis (use of a Biblical text to fit in with a fixed or modern agenda) was clarified in that many modernisers re-interpret ancient texts by changing the original understanding of certain words such as *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, especially in 1 Corinthians 6:9, where the active and passive partners are equally condemned. In modern society tolerance has taken priority when judging human relationships, while the Bible dictates absolute rights and wrongs which Christians accept on the basis of its Divine inspiration. While debating with those who sincerely disagree with us we must always speak the truth in love but never condone what the Bible forbids. Compassion calls us to listen; truth calls us to be clear, love demands that we

be transparently honest. We must not ever apologise for our position based on the eternal truth of Scriptural revelation. [The speaker at our lecture had given testimony to his past battle with some aspects of Old Testament Scripture, but has since come to accept it because Jesus never contradicted it. Indeed, in Matthew 19, 4-6, he went back to the earliest chapters of Genesis when speaking of the immutability of marriage between one man and one woman. He described how truth is like a hand within a glove; the glove represents the culture of the period under discussion in any part of scripture, but good exegesis is important in separating out eternal truth (represented by the hand) from prevailing culture (the glove) rather than the hand of eternal truth adapting to today's cultural glove.] For a more detailed presentation of this concept Google 'Hand in glove' by Malcolm Duncan in which he debates, at length, the issues of disagreement about same-sex marriage with Rev. Steve Chalke.

We must appreciate the essential differences between male and female, physically, emotionally and psychologically. These differences go to create a fulfilling marriage, which balances are absent in a same-sex marriage. It was male and female together who were/are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). The bonding of a man and woman united in marriage is chosen to reflect the relationship between God and His Church in Ephesians 5: 31-32. The purity of sexual love between husband and wife is celebrated throughout the Bible, but physical sexual activity outside or before marriage is forbidden by God.

Finally, we were challenged to examine the criteria by which an individual's identity is defined; in modern society a person's sexuality has taken precedence over most other attributes. Scripture demands that we consider all people as made in the image of God and therefore valued by Him whatever their sexuality, gender, race, achievements or social standing. We recognise personhood, but also the interdependence of male and female in purity. Promiscuity is both illustrated and condemned throughout the entire Bible. Intimacy in marriage is celebrated. What is considered by society as legal/acceptable does not always reflect Biblical ideas of right and wrong. Within society Christians will have to accept misunderstanding but ultimately our first loyalty is to God. Martyn Lloyd Jones was reassuringly quoted as saying: 'we are most effective in the world when we are most different from it, even if we are hated for it.'

An MP3 CD of the lecture, and questions following, is available from Rev. Ken Robinson.

Additional submissions.

Headway (Ireland) continues to take issue with misleading or superficial portrayals of the teaching of the Methodist Church in Ireland.