

A critique of the British Methodist Church's report "God in love unites us."
from Headway Ireland (Methodist Evangelicals Together)

The Marriage and Relationships Task Group of the British Methodist Conference has produced a report which is now being discussed by Circuits in Britain. The 65 page report is complex and controversial and if its recommendations are adopted it will be a significant departure from the traditional biblical understanding of chastity and marriage. While we recognise the pastoral concerns that underlie it, "Methodist Evangelicals Together" and its partner "Headway Ireland" have combined to critique the report, to declare it to be unbalanced and suggest that it fails to listen to the Bible, to Tradition and to Experience. It is not possible in a short article to summarise the document so four proposals are extracted, by way of introduction.

First, the report emphasises that the quality of relationships, including sexual relationships, which exhibit good qualities, reflect the presence of God's love. The report departs from the traditional view of chastity (celibacy) outside of marriage and believes that British Methodism should no longer require it. No mention is made of the perfect life of the Lord Jesus Christ, a single, celibate Jewish rabbi. We contend that sexual relations are not essential for fulfilment in life.

Secondly, co-habitation and civil partnerships, it is suggested, can be a celebration of the love of God (within them). The report proposes that the British Church should offer blessings to those in civil partnerships, both for same-sex and mixed-sex couples.

Thirdly, the report plans for British Methodism to change its liturgies and theology to accommodate same-sex marriage. Marriage should be defined as between "two people" rather than "one man and one woman." The report notes that society has developed in this area.

Fourthly, it is recommended that liturgies should be provided to mark the end of a marriage in divorce.

Listening to the Bible

Sometimes the report listens carefully to Scripture. At other times it is difficult to avoid the impression that contemporary experience is given priority over the biblical view of marriage and sexuality. In the story-line of Scripture, marriage is consistently taught as between a man and a woman. The Methodist Evangelicals Together study guide "Remaining Faithful" reminds us that marriage between man and woman bookends Scripture as a whole: in Genesis 2:21-24 and in Revelation 19:9; 21:2. Jesus reinforced this teaching in Matthew 19:5. While there is a trajectory of moral development in the Bible, when it comes to teaching on sexual relationships, the progression is towards greater restrictions. The interdependence of male and female within marriage is a key understanding of marriage and it is an indication of God's relationship with Israel and the Church (Hosea 2:19; Ephesians 5:31-32).

In Scripture all references to homosexual practice are negative. The biblical writers' condemnation of same-sex practice was rooted in their theology of creation. Some revisionist scholars agree that this is the teaching of the Bible but argue that the Bible is wrong. The Bible is countercultural and sadly this seems to be an embarrassment to some. Scant attention

to Scripture can produce a report that is full of love and lawlessness. The report mentions promptings of the Spirit, gospel values, and trajectories of development but shows little enthusiasm for submitting to the plain meaning of Scripture. It is symptomatic of a clash of two irreconcilable lines of argument.

Listening to the Church

Marriage as a union between a man and a woman has constantly been part of the Church's definition of marriage. It is disappointing that none of the authors cited in the report are from supporters of the traditional view of marriage. To be commended is Robert A J Gagnon, "The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics."

Listening to Experience

The report rightly listens to the experience of co-habiting couples and LGBTI+ people. However it ignores the experience of those who remain faithful to the Bible's teaching. Many same-sex-attracted people are living fulfilled lives having chosen to remain celibate in obedience to Scripture.

Concluding reflections

This is a British report and does not reflect the views of the Methodist Church in Ireland.

The report makes explicit what has been implicit in past debates and propounds what was "effectively" agreed at earlier British Conferences. Loosely worded reports can morph into a major theological/moral shift. A revision of the meaning of marriage and chastity may seem to be a natural progression for British Methodism when it has been accepting same-sex and co-habiting couples in Christian ministry. Yet when church law explicitly defines marriage as something contrary to the biblical teaching it is a watershed moment. Scriptural holiness seems a distant echo.

Conscience clauses are included to make allowances for ministers and churches who refuse to approve same-sex relationships. Yet such ministers must compromise the dictates of their conscience by referring a same-sex couple to another minister who has no such qualms of conscience about solemnising their marriage. That seems unconscionable. We contend that the Holy Spirit is not revealing one truth to one group of believers and a different truth to another. Only one can be right.

If this proposal is ratified at the next British Conference it will spoil relationships not just within the British Conference but with Methodist Conferences in other countries and sister churches of other Communion.

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