

Moderator, in our report there is an introductory section on scripture.

We argued quite a lot about that in the Forum. Over the last decade, there have been six reports to the General Assembly on sexuality and marriage. Each one of the previous six discussed the principles on which we interpret scripture both as a whole and in particular verses.

Initially, we summarised those six reports and their passages on scripture, and it came to about 8 pages. Eventually we decided to step back and to present the digest you have in the report. Argument about interpretation is part of the Protestant tradition from the very beginning. Erasmus called it the struggle between “Brawlers” and “Lovers”. It is endless and irresolvable. It is who we are.

The introduction to our report emphasises that few if any of us are on either extreme of this struggle to interpret scripture. Almost all of us are somewhere on a spectrum of interpretation and we switch up and down that spectrum as, guided by the Spirit of God, we try to apply scripture to the concrete messiness of living.

In the second part of our report, we look at 3 styles of argument which have been used about same-sex marriage.

We do this because over the years, bits have been quarried from these different kinds of argument, and the chippings taken out of context are unclear and at times have been used polemically.

First, there is a series of arguments from human rights. This is the justice argument and it is about the wrongness of discriminating against people, and of marginalising them, and denying their gifts and identity and how they may flourish. This is an important argument, but it isn't the only one and there are other dimensions.

Second, there are analogical arguments. These are arguments pointing to similar or parallel cases. A lot of work has been done here by Roman Catholic theologians. Here we look at the fact that historically, marriage has taken various forms sometimes primarily within secular law, sometimes a civil affair; sometimes including ordained persons, sometimes not; sometimes permitting divorce and remarriage, sometimes not. Protestants do not understand marriage as a sacrament but as a covenant voluntarily entered into by two persons who bind themselves to each other in a series of vows. We point to the validity of the marriages of people who for reasons of age, medical condition or choice do not have children of their own, and we learn that it is simply not the case that for a relationship to be counted a marriage it must have direct procreative intent. We show that there has always been a process in the church for discerning whether this or that sexual relationship should be marked and celebrated as a marriage and we used to have arrangements like marriage by habit and repute. There are now civil same-sex marriages. Do we have sufficient grounds to celebrate them also as religious and truly Christian covenants?

Just as “justice arguments” though powerful in the way they defend the marginalised, form a strand of argument different from the theological, so analogical arguments, though eloquent in showing parallels and expanding our horizons, are often characterized as being about a deficiency.

And so thirdly, we look at more specifically theological arguments.

Fifty years ago next year, women were first ordained into the ministry of the Church of Scotland. Ranged against them there was a variety of arguments. In fact rather similar strands of argument to those I have listed so far. There were scriptural arguments and arguments about male-female

complementarity and the headship of men. There were bizarre arguments about impurity because women have periods. There was disgust. There were arguments based on tradition and inter-church approval of our ministers. With ordination there was a polarization of men versus women.

Initially, it was the justice arguments which prevailed, with a number of people accepting reluctantly and fretting that the direct teaching of scripture was being set aside. The acceptance was grudging. Gradually our understanding deepened. We learned that it is not the case that the Incarnation of the Eternal Word of God had made no change to the order of fallen humanity, in which man was held to be the head of the woman within and beyond marriage. And so we gradually came to understand more deeply that the person who represents Christ at Communion and repeats the words of the Eucharistic Prayer represents Christ in Christ's person and rather than in Christ's gender. We came to understand that gender is nothing to do with it. That, at a deeper level even than justice, became the theological turning point, and the ground on which we wholeheartedly welcome the ministry of women. The old polarization fell away.

Now, there is a lot of stuff out there in the literature, claiming to be a theology of same-sex marriage. Actually most of it is about justice or some analogy or another. We chose to lift up the approach taken by Professor Robert Song of Durham University because his approach is different, because it actually resonates with the profound change we as a church underwent over the ordination of women, and because it is fundamentally very simple and flows from Christology.

When the Eternal Word of God was incarnated in our midst, that changed what it is to be human and what human flourishing is. If the first order of creation was for man and woman to pro-create and bring a people into covenant relation to God, with the coming of Jesus, in whom creation is fulfilled, we are invited to be united with him. And in that union with him we find our identity, our wholeness, our peace and the root of a non-needy, non-insatiable relating with others.

Building on this, which is a Christological re-situating of what it is to be a human person, Song suggests that rather than the old fraught polarization of heterosexual versus homosexual, where the notion of homosexuality is demonized as disobedient to a creation expectation to pro-create, that entire polarization needs to be reframed. This is much the same way that our thinking about the ordination of women was reframed and placed on a different basis. The re-framing now is to understand that there are procreational unions and there are non-procreational ones. And non-procreational unions are not deficient. Both are valid, in so far as they are rooted in Christ, and each in its own different way witnesses to the faithfulness of God.

After much discussion the Forum saw this as one of those historic points where a deepening occurs in theological thinking, where suddenly the pieces of a long argument come together in a different way. Where both sides can flourish, both may be protected and both may be celebrated.

We are fully aware that not everyone is going to be convinced by this, but some who were once marginalized are affirmed and are given hope. This is indeed a middle ground. It is about framing the question differently. That's where the apology comes in. It is to enable and celebrate structures of faithfulness. Yes, it is unfamiliar but it should not be so unfamiliar in this Church because it mirrors our change of heart and welcome of the ministry of women.

Again after much discussion, the Forum presented these 3 strands of argument, the human rights, the analogical and then the theological, in a negative rather than a positive way. We see this as permissive rather than directive. We say that after reflection we can see no sufficient theological reason for the Church now not to authorize specific ministers to officiate at same-sex weddings, IF doing so does not prejudice the position of those who decline to do so for reasons of conscience.

And so we ask the Assembly to receive our report as a resource, and to instruct the Legal Questions Committee to do a scoping exercise to determine the availability of legal protection for any minister who, if invited to do so, would decline to officiate as a matter of conscience.

Moderator, I submit the report and move the Deliverances.

The Very Rev Professor Iain R Torrance