

Response to the Report of Theological Forum to the General Assembly 2017

This Report greatly disturbed me. Theologically I disagree with almost all of it.

The argument of the Report develops from what is said in “The Use of Scripture”, Paragraph 1.5:

“Another more inclusive argument in favour of same-sex relationships rests on a distinction between the written text of Scripture and the living Word of God, the latter being associated with Jesus Christ who speaks to us in our hearts and consciences. According to this argument, we owe our allegiance to Jesus Christ the Word made flesh rather than to the literal words of Scripture, and, for that reason, if people believe that Jesus is now calling the Church to a new understanding of how faithfulness may be displayed in human relationships, this should be taken seriously as a contemporary form of obedience.”

The Word of God which is Jesus Christ must be distinguished from the written word of Scripture. It is not identical. In this the Report is correct. Equally however, the Word of God which is Jesus Christ cannot be understood apart from the written word of Scripture. There is a relationship, analogous to a hypostatic union, between the Word of God and the written word of Scripture. To separate them and suggest as does the Report that Jesus Christ “speaks to us in our hearts and consciences”, as if the Word of God could be understood without the immediacy and controlling influence of the written Scripture, and without checking whether what is spoken “to our hearts and consciences” accords with Scripture is wrong. It can only lead to a sea of trouble.

The writers of the Report claim to acknowledge, in Paragraph 1.7, “the authority of Scripture and the authority of Christ as the King and Head of the Church” but say that they wish “to look *through* rather than *at* the words of the text”. It is clear however from what follows in the Report that what they believe Jesus Christ is saying to their hearts and consciences is different from what we otherwise might understand Scripture to be saying. How is it possible for the writers of the Report to know whether what they believe is spoken to the heart and conscience is true and correct when it is not tested by Scripture? On whose or what authority can they say this categorically? They can only rely on what others or the Church says, not on what the Scriptures say. This surely is a view that was battled against, denied and swept away by the Reformers who upheld the authority and necessity of the written word.

The writers of the Report claim that they seek “to look *through* rather than at the words of the text”. That is simply another way of saying that the Bible *contains* the Word of God: that it is not in itself the Word of God. As such the writers of the Report do not feel the need thereafter to quote Scripture or argue that what they affirm is supported by Scripture.

Nowhere in the Report do the writers seek to expound what the Scriptures say about marriage or quote what Scripture says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” i.e. one whole person (Genesis 2:24). Yet this is the clear message of Scripture and what the Church has maintained through the centuries.

The aim of the writers of the Report, from the start, has been to justify same-sex marriage. They claim that Scripture, interpreted in the way they propose by reading “*through* the words of the text”, supports such a claim!

The Report goes on to consider:

- (A) Arguments based on understanding of human rights.
- (B) Analogical arguments ... from traditional understandings of marriage.
- (C) Fully theological arguments for the admissibility of same-sex marriage.

In (A) and (B) the Report is concerned with what Christians and the Church have said. What Scripture says does not appear to be important. There is no mention of the considerable amount that Scripture says about marriage and the marriage covenant. There is also no recognition nor mention of the claim of Judaism, which lies behind what Paul says, that true marriage only takes place within the context of God’s covenant, and therefore a Christian must only marry a Christian (2 Corinthians 6:14).

The position of Judaism is important. Judaism acknowledges that marriage in some form takes place throughout the world. According to Judaism however, true marriage only takes place within the context of God’s covenant with his people – between man, God and woman. Accordingly, in the marriage ceremony the bridegroom and his bride say the words of Hosea 2 verses 19 and 29; “I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord.” Paul clearly was aware of this and affirmed it. It influenced what he says in the Pastoral Epistles about an elder, deacon, bishop being the husband of one wife.

In (C) the Report lays considerable stress on the work of Professor Robert Song:

“The coming of Christ resituates marriage. Not only does it make evident that marriage is not to be grounded untheologically outside an understanding of God’s covenant relationship with us, it also bursts the seams of marriage and points to a new eschatological order which marrying and giving in marriage, and therefore procreation, are no longer part.”
(Paragraph 2.4.9)

That is to say, “sexual differentiation was for procreation”, that children may be born.

In regard to Covenant, Professor Song, in so far as, like the writers of the Report, separates soul and body, he uses the word “covenant” in a way that is different from the writers of Scripture, where “Covenant” embraces the whole person soul and body, not just the body.

The Report seems to be saying that the sole purpose of marriage is for procreation, which seems very akin to traditional Roman Catholic doctrine and indicates a remarkable disrespect for women. If the sole purpose of women is to have children, does this not belittle the status of women? According to Scripture men and women are equal before God. In Christ alone does a man or woman, married or unmarried, find their identity and fulfilment as man or woman. In marriage, a man and woman together become one whole person.

According to the Report (Paragraph 2.4.10), procreation is not necessary for the advancement of the Kingdom of God:

“It follows that the central issue in this long running debate has moved. It is not – as it has often been portrayed – as ‘homosexual vs heterosexual’ but ‘procreative vs non-procreative’” (Paragraph 2.4.11).

The writers of the Report can only make this remarkable statement because they understand sexual activity as belonging only to the body and not with the whole person as both soul and body.

The Report, like Greek philosophy, is distinguishing between soul and body and separating them. It regards sexual activity as one function of the body, not of the soul, and not of the whole person. It separates soul and body. In Scripture however, there is no separation between soul and body. Sexuality belongs to the whole person, whether man or woman. We will be man or woman in heaven, although there will be no marrying or giving in marriage (Matthew 22:30). As my brother Tom used to say, “a person is a besouled body or an embodied soul.”

The Report continues:

“If we accept that sex even in a non-procreative context can be good, and that there is no final reason why all committed relationships should be intrinsically or deliberately open to procreation, we are opening the way to same-sex relationships” (Paragraph 2.4.13).

What the Report here claims, does not follow. It is utterly wrong to suggest that because in some marriages, and frequently within marriage, sexual union does not result in the birth of children, that “procreative” and “non –procreative” union is therefore a legitimate basis for same-sex marriage. There is no rational reason or Biblical basis for such a remarkable claim.

Conclusion: The Report is right to affirm that as Christians we must accept and love those with a homosexual orientation and repent that for too long the Church has caused unjust suffering to those with a homosexual orientation.

We must affirm, and I quote from what I have previously written:

“The sexual desires of husband and wife for each other are in themselves good, holy and lovely. They are an integral part of their whole being in relationship to God and each other. God in creating and sanctifying man, male and female, includes their sexuality within their humanity, so that the physical love with which they love one another is important, being integral to their whole love for one another. ... Marriage is a question of the whole man and the whole woman and of the total union of both.”ⁱ

Men and women are different. Their difference is not limited to the biological sphere in that women have children and men do not. God has created them differently. Their difference, which includes their sexual difference, affects their entire being and they complement each other, being together created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26).

Two people of the same sex do not, and cannot, complement one another as do husband and wife.

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ⁱ *God, Family and Sexuality*, Edited by David W. Torrance. Handsel Press 1997. Page 41