

Same-sex marriage: Has Christ been divided?



At around AD 50, Paul establishes the church in Corinth and having done so he then moves on to Ephesus, 180 miles away on the western coast of Turkey. It is while he is at Ephesus that he hears of divisions and jealous rivalries breaking out in the congregation back in Corinth. A number of issues have come to the fore not least the question of celibacy versus marriage. Paul himself lives a celibate life and promotes celibacy, following the example of Christ, as the ultimate ideal. But as we know from our common human experience, celibacy is a way of life for the few and not the many. This reality was something that was a bit of a hot potato for members of the Corinthian congregation. Writing in his epistle to the Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 1:10-18) Paul is forced to affirm that it is better to marry and share a life in a loving, supportive, and sexually fulfilling relationship rather than to struggle with an uncontained and frustrated life that lacks intimacy and which, as we now know in the modern age that the ancients would never have realised to the same extent, can lead to quite chronic and destabilising mental health issues.

The Bishops have now decided not to sanction same-sex marriage and to reaffirm that only marriages between a man and a woman can be solemnised in church. It is fair to say that there are mixed views within the Church as to what constitutes a Christian marriage with lines being drawn between those who advocate what might best be described as traditional marriage and those who hold to the idea that the nature of marriage has changed as our understanding of human biology and psychology has evolved, not least in the post-war decades. Whatever your view, the decision by the House of Bishops to go only so far as to allow for the blessing of faithful homosexual relationships has created huge amounts of pain for a great many people, not just for those who identify themselves directly as part of the LGBTQIA+ community but also for a great many people who advocate that the Church should now be aligned with the norms in wider society. In other words, marriage should be accessible to all, not least because this is now recognised by most people as a basic human right.

For many people, including the more than one thousand parish priests, me included, who have openly stated their support for same-sex marriage, the decision by the Bishops can only be viewed as a failure of leadership and will in the eyes of many merely confirm that the church discriminates against gay people. And let's be clear that what is being proposed is discriminatory.

Whatever your view this decision widens the gap between the Church of England and the people of England – and can only make the task of pastoral ministry and preaching the good news of the Gospel on the ground more difficult.

Let's go back to St Paul for a moment. St Paul appeals to the Corinthian Church for unity in Christ. He begs that divisions be put aside for the sake of the faith and for the sake of growing the Church. And some will want to argue for this by way of defending what it is the Bishops are asking for. Yet at no point does Paul suggest 'unity in Christ' should be at the cost of personal integrity. The current crisis over same-sex marriage challenges the integrity of everyone, as did the debate over the ordination of women, not all that long ago. There can be unity in Christ but only on the basis of agreeing with what is right and what is wrong. In terms of basic human rights, the prohibition of same-sex marriage is morally indefensible. Unless the General Synod of the Church of England,

which meets in February, or if Parliament itself intervenes in the ensuing months, then we are set for many more years of agony over the question of same-sex marriage. Nothing else is going to be of much consequence. The Bishops have set themselves up for many more years of apologising for discriminating against gay people. No feigned episcopal tears, with words to the effect that this is the best that we can do, is going to make any difference. For the vast majority of people who live in our country what is being suggested is simply not good enough.

Personally, as a parish priest sworn to obedience, I find myself sitting at the foot of the cross in profound silence... As we watch and wait to see what unfolds. Many in the wider world will be asking questions of us in the next days, friends, neighbours, colleagues... Those questions are going to be very difficult to answer. Paul asks a rhetorical question of the Corinthian Church, "Has Christ been divided?" We might well ask that same question. And ask further, "Have the Bishops divided him?"

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