

Same-sex marriage – two perspectives

David Powys and John Capper reflect on same-sex marriage. Both viewpoints are based on presentations they gave at St John's Cranbourne on 16 August 2015.

by David Powys

Five years ago few could have predicted the momentum now gained for 'Marriage Equality'. Just who is driving this is unclear. Some are themselves homosexual, though many homosexual people profess no interest in marriage. Whoever the drivers are, their capacity to reshape public opinion is unrivalled, and the impatience, anger and intolerance of many converted to their cause, is plain. They have won over most major media outlets, something powerfully highlighted on the ABC's *Media Watch* on 17 August. Opponents have been labelled 'bigots' and 'homophobes', effectively gagging one side of the argument. Momentum has built in the absence of substantial debate. There is something deeply disturbing when equality and fairness are denied 'in their own name'.

Public opinion has been turned by a generic narrative, supported not so much by research, as by repeatedly offering powerful personal anecdotes. Everyone has encountered these, one or two per week, fleshing out the narrative. That narrative runs as follows. Some Australians find they can give and receive love through homosexual expression alone. Many of these are already in, or expect to enter, a lifelong monogamous relationship with a person of the same sex. This is their ideal. They, and other same-sex attracted people, need assurance that they are normal, and accepted by wider society. In consequence Australia should urgently legislate to allow same-sex marriage, and so grant this ideal a status equal to that of the marriage of a man and a woman.

This narrative can be challenged in many ways, though this is rare in public discourse. Below are three ways.

Will 'Marriage Equality' actually deliver the outcome anticipated - the sought reassurance that same-sex attracted people are equal to others? In a relatively short space of time Australia has shifted from prohibiting to accepting the normality of homosexual behaviour, and of those who identify as homosexual. Numerous legislative changes have removed discrimination to create equality. Publicly, though admittedly not in every unregulated private context, homosexual people have achieved equality, save in the area of the right to marry, and the right to become parents. Whether coercing public opinion to embrace something which a minority at least see as a logical fiction, will bring greater equality, rather than a counteraction in unregulated spaces, is a moot point.

Can Australians, of whatever sexuality, sincerely embrace same-sex marriage as an ideal equal to traditional marriage? The dream of falling in love with someone of the opposite sex, of remaining happily with them until death, and of conceiving and raising offspring, is a deep, and almost universal, human ideal. I'll call it 'marriage'. This is what nearly every human being longs for at some stage, if not at many stages, in their life, whether they achieve it or not. It is this that nearly every parent and grandparent, of whatever sexuality, deep down, desires for their progeny. This ideal is symbolised in the wedding of a woman and a man. If this is true, how can Australians be asked to hold up as ideal something which, though good, most do not regard as ideal? Some will respond that many heterosexual marriages are far from perfect, and that some homosexual relationships are exemplary, but this is not my point. The telling question is whether Australians, delving into their deepest longings and aspirations, can truly say that they hold homosexual marriage to be an ideal for their children and grandchildren equal to heterosexual marriage? Some might be capable of this, but in truthful reality, the proportion would be very small.

Australians are passionate about children's rights. Will children be well served by redefining marriage? There are two groups to be considered: children in the care of same-sex couples, and children in general.

Redefining marriage would have direct implications for children of same-sex couples, whether brought into their families by natural or medical insemination, this and surrogacy, 'adoption', or family blending. They, for the most part, will have no say in the matter. These will be children who find themselves raised primarily by two men or by two women, and possibly wrongly subject to ridicule in unregulated private spaces, and added to the ranks of children with limited access to information about their biological heritage. It needs to be acknowledged that there is already a considerable cohort of children raised by same-sex couples, some of whom speak most positively about the experience. More broadly, many modern children are raised by single adults, and in many instances these children are well served. But once again, this is not particularly relevant to promoting the very best for children. I have relevant personal experience. My father died when I was three, and I was raised by my mother with much assistance from her own mother. I believe those two women did exceptionally well. However I longed for my father's presence and influence, and for the way in which, as a male parent, he would have enriched my life and development. I accepted my lot, but would not have done this happily if this lot had been the result of government involvement. It seems we may not have seen fully our mistakes with The Stolen Generation: whenever possible, and often it is not possible, children should be raised by their biological parents.

All children will be affected in another way. Two different ideals of intimate relationships and marriage will need to be equally promoted to children in schools. This may assist children fixedly same-sex attracted from an early age, and boost their overall mental health. But this, combined with the creeping suggestion that sexual identity is fixed from an early age (contrary to the recently overturned orthodoxy that sexual identity is unformed in children and uncertain in adolescents), will probably adversely affect many more children. How? By paving a way for confusion and pain, with children unhelpfully encouraged to embrace a minority identity prematurely, prompted in some cases by adolescent contrariness.

Given that a balanced consideration of the proposal to redefine marriage has become impossible in the present socio-political climate, any decision should be delayed until there has been full and unfettered public debate, and the Australian public has the opportunity to express informed views through a plebiscite.

(Note: I have deliberately not pursued uniquely Christian arguments, and do not see myself as a bigot or homophobe.)

The Revd Dr David Powys is
Vicar of St John's Cranbourne.

by John Capper

Marriage is a social contract which varies from place to place and time to time and is a social construct adopted by Jews, Christians, and others. It is not their invention. In Australia, it is the state that sets the shape for and limits to marriage.

A changed world in which values are shaped differently raises issues as to whether our assumptions are cultural or Christian. Having clergy as celebrants makes them agents of the state as well as representatives of God. This complicates Christian involvement in the current debate.

Marriage is a formal public life-long commitment, and is a subset of marriage-like arrangements (that is, less formal or less public or less intentionally lifelong commitment, ranging from cohabitation without or with sexual relations through short-term serial monogamy to longer term but less formal public commitment, or "common law marriage").

Not all Christians may want to affirm equality in marriage between heterosexual couples and homosexual couples. However, the disagreement between scholars over the particular biblical texts pertaining to sexuality and their relevance to the current debate should allow faithful Christians to consider this an area of moral openness. On that basis, even if they do not support same-sex marriage, they *should* consider themselves free not to oppose it.

Australians should challenge the argument that "all the world is doing it." As a recent letter from Church leaders to the Prime Minister stated, "Australia's definition of marriage as a union of a man and a woman is consistent with that of the vast majority of world nations, who represent over 91 per cent of the global population."

That said, the mood for change is growing in Australia. What has long been argued is that whatever the gender of the couple, the partnership should be treated equally. More recent is the shift to arguing that same-sex couples ought also be allowed to marry. This adds to the complexity for Australians, and for Christians particularly.

Presently, even common law understandings of partnership deny same-sex couples some of the benefits and much of the security that common law marriage gives to heterosexual couples. There is an inequity in this. There is a strong argument for bringing fairness. And if change is to be fully fair, gay couples should not only be given common law recognition, they should also be permitted to enter marriage.

Within the diversity of Christian views, one principle is held universally: lifelong commitment between human beings is a positive reflection of God's faithfulness. Social acceptance and affirmation of faithfulness of a couple *as a couple* is a strong factor in encouraging lifelong commitment.

The many inclusive non-judgemental texts and themes in Scripture provide a challenge to an argument for exclusion based on a few particular texts. The weight of the particular texts cited in opposing same-sex relations is small compared with the overwhelming weight of texts that affirm faithfulness. Careful reading of Scripture as a whole suggests that Christians are free to affirm same-sex relationships.

The social changes that come from affirmation of same-sex relations are complex. For many the concern is for children. It is now hard to sustain the argument that a "normal family" has a father and a mother. The law provides protection for families of many forms, including greater equity in adoption. Christians should continue to urge governments to ensure that law, policy and resources provide for the positive nurture of children.

We are assured that Christian celebrants will be allowed to refuse to marry same-sex couples, but this is, in a way, perpetuating an inequality. Sadly, it will align this inequity with religion. This is not likely to be well received. A good option may be for churches to move out of the marriage business, and into the business of nurturing faithful relationships.

Christianity is not primarily a moral system. God seems more generous than some followers think. We all live in our own cultural world, and its norms tend to become our norms. Christians have a long history of reconsidering inherited views – abolition of slavery and the equality of women are two comparatively recent examples. Of course, not every new view is a good one. We should not simply follow the trend. Christians are called to live in love and grace, with tradition as a guide, rather than a binding absolute.

For most of the 200 plus years of white settlement in Australia social norms have reflected traditional Christian morality. This is no longer the case. Christians cannot dictate what society should or must do. Christians are called to engage with the world as it changes, with humility.

There is diversity of practice and understanding between Christians on this and many other topics. However, Christian morality is a guide for Christians rather than a demand on our society. As Archbishop Freier stated in *The Age* on 6 July 2015: "It is no longer reasonable for us to expect that the state's approach will be as prescriptive and demanding as the Christian understanding, but nor is it reasonable for the state to expect Christians to give up their comprehensive and long-standing view".

If the Church was to step away from the marrying business, there would be new ministry opportunities. When a previously non-Christian couple come to faith in God through Christ, Christian marriage (solemnisation of matrimony) could be for their relationship like baptism is for each of them as individuals. This would shift our focus to nurturing loving, faithful, God-centred relationships. Such a ministry of reconciliation might extend to their families and could spill over into workplaces, organisations and neighbourhoods. It would be an affirmation of faithfulness rather than a defence of traditional forms: a move from defensiveness to embrace.

Whether we affirm same-sex marriage or not, there are challenges ahead for Christians. We do better to embrace equality in marriage than to stand against it. However, equality will bring more complexity – for Christians and for the community. The danger is that those who ask for clarity will be called bigots. We do not seem to currently have a political system able to deal with complexity or subtlety.

The Revd Dr John Capper is Director of Learning and Teaching and a Senior Lecturer in Theology at the University of Divinity.

This article was originally published in The Melbourne Anglican
<http://tma.melbourneanglican.org.au/> . *Re-posted with permission.*