

Why Ignore Wisdom?

The Church
of England on
*Men and Women
in Marriage*

CHRISTIAN
MARRIAGE
First in a Series

By Andrew Goddard

No recent report from the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission has caused as much media confusion and engendered such vehement repudiation and anger as *Men and Women in Marriage*, published April 10. Some erroneously claimed the church was now more flexible on blessing gay partnerships but the press release made clear this was false. It quoted the commission's chairman, the Bishop of Coventry, stating "the document is clear that public forms of blessing belong to marriage alone." The *Church Times*, in a short, dismissive comment, advised that "the kindest thing to do with the new report *Men and Women in Marriage* is to ignore it."

These responses show just how volatile this subject is in the Church of England and how difficult many find it to engage in constructive theological discussion. Despite some weaknesses, the six-part, 50-paragraph document represents a valuable contribution which richly repays the careful study called for by the archbishops. The rapid campaign to sideline and silence it by opponents is an illuminating and worrying sign of where things may be headed in the Church of England.

The Central Claim

A common complaint has been that the document does not reflect the diversity of views among Anglicans on the subject of marriage. This fails to understand its clearly stated purpose. Aware of government plans to redefine marriage in English law to include same-sex couples, last year the commission requested and was authorised to produce a summary of the Church of England's understanding of marriage and in particular its doctrine that marriage is between a man and a woman. Its report complements the Church of England submission to the government consultation which opposed "equal marriage" (to a similar outcry from the usual suspects) but with limited theological rationale.

As the report's first part makes clear, the document is therefore not a contribution to wider debates on human sexuality. That will appear from a group under Sir Joseph Pilling, which will submit its crucial report to the House of Bishops by the end of

this year. Indeed, sensitivity about not encroaching on that report has weakened this one, which simply expounds the definition of marriage found in various Church of England documents. It does so to help Christians in publicly defending marriage and to correct misunderstandings of marriage liable to have harmful consequences. It is especially defending the claim that "the sexual differentiation of men and women is a gift of God" (para 3, citing Gen. 1:27-28). Rather than condemn and dismiss it for not setting out the views of those who reject church teaching, critics need to refute this central claim or show why it is no longer essential to the church's teaching on marriage.

Unwrapping God's Gift

Claiming Christ's authority (Matt. 19), paragraphs 5-12 defend the teaching that "marriage is a gift of God in creation." Its discussion has been widely criticised for failing to explore the diverse and changing forms of marriage in human history and culture. This misses the point and fails to acknowledge that the report refers to these but refuses to reduce mar-

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riage to a developing cultural phenomenon. Rather, marriage is "an expression of the human nature which God has willed for us and which we share" (6).

Those who reject this argument have so far failed to clarify their alternative. Are they rejecting the view that marriage is a divine gift in creation, presumably in favour of a progressive, historicist view in which transcending biology is the next stage in our growing enlightenment and *gnosis*? Or are they offering an alternative and incompatible account of our divinely given human nature?

The report emphasises a number of areas which

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those seeking to make marriage blind to sexual difference seem to eliminate: “the natural, and especially the biological, terms of human existence” (10), “the distinctive form of nature we humans are given” (11) and how we enhance “the bond between the sexes culturally” (11). It does so because it believes we need “a society in which men and women relate well to each other” and men and women are “equally and differently human” (12). This claim about the significance of sexual difference is an important one, which the report sadly fails to illustrate or fully defend.

Supporting Society

The report highlights the relationship of marriage to wider society in the third section (13-20), quoting Jeremy Taylor that marriage “is only one form of society, but a central one” (13). Whether married or not, all “have a stake in the health of marriage as a factor in the health of society” (15). That health requires the integration of three strands which it highlights as “structural elements” with “a central place” (18): marriage outside the close family circle (exogamy), permanence, and “an exclusive commitment of one man and one woman” (17). Although societies can accept compromises here these “have tended to be of limited scope” (19). This offers a helpful, succinct summary of marriage and its importance as a “flexible and supportive social institution” (16).

Marriage and Children

The particular concern is “the principle of union between one man and one woman” (21) and here the document relates partnership to parenthood. Appealing to the 1930 Lambeth Conference, it claims “we are (potentially or actually) parents as we are wife and husband, not parents on the one hand and husband or wife on the other” (22). This is because, in committing our sex’s procreative power exclusively to one person of the opposite sex, we are opening ourselves to parenthood through the marriage partnership. The question of infertile couples is noted in a comment that this opening to parenthood “may be true even of a couple who ... have no prospect of actually having children” (21). The questions of how, when, and why it may be true for such couples is, however, regrettably left unexplored.

One reason for same-sex marriage being attractive to many is that we tend to emphasise marriage as “a relationship between persons,” but the report insists that we cannot detach this from our biological differentiation. This means “marriage is more personal, not less, as the partners come to it in receptiveness of what only the opposite sex can bring to their own” (26). Here again the document would be strengthened by saying more as to what “only the opposite sex can bring” and by explaining how the claim that “persons are not asexual, but are either male or female” responds to the reality of those who are intersex.

The fifth and longest section (27-40) appeals to the longstanding and respected tradition stemming from Augustine of the “three ends” of marriage: offspring, faithfulness, and sacramental union. It briefly and helpfully expounds each, rejecting narrow interpretations, to show the cooperation of human nature and human freedom. The good of offspring, for example, is about children’s nurture and development, not just biological reproduction, and relies “in different ways on the complementary gifts of men and women” (35).

Pastoral Accommodation

The final section explores the relation of state and church to marriage, arguing that marriages are made not by church or state but by “God’s providence working through the public promises of the couples themselves” (41). The church fulfils its mission by teaching the Gospel both in doctrine (by “proclaiming God’s goodness in creation and redemption”) and by “giving pastoral help to those who seek to engage with the challenges of life responsibly” (45). The report is clear that “the truth about God and his works” is “the basis for concrete practical engagements” (46) but these engagements may require “a degree of flexibility” faced with “hard circumstances or exceptional conditions” (47), what the Christian moral tradition calls “casuistry.”

This leads to another important and misrepresented argument: that pastoral wisdom may make “accommodations for specific conditions” (49). So, while upholding marriage’s permanence, further marriage after a divorce may be allowed as an exceptional act. This leads to the only reference to same-sex partnerships where the report makes no

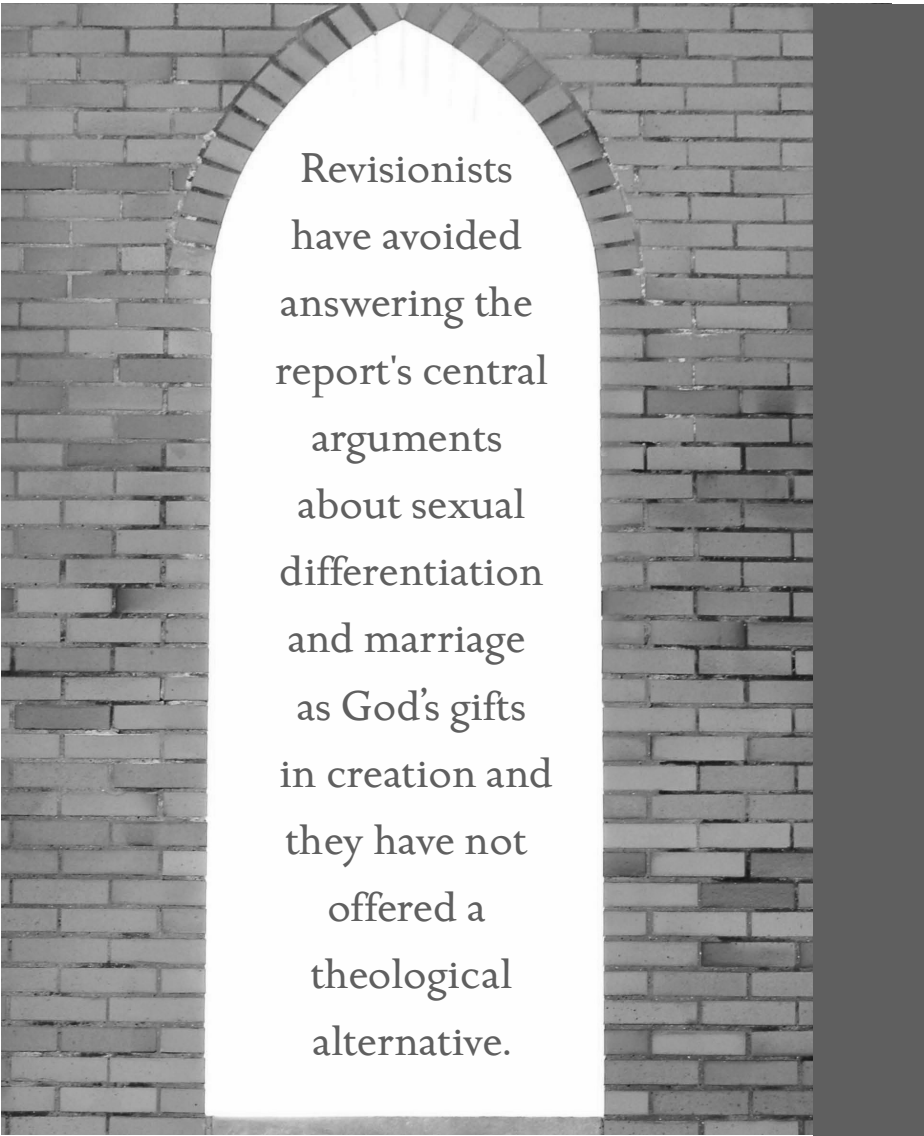
new statement but simply refers to the advice on pastoral practice found in the 2005 statement from the bishops on civil partnerships. That advice about providing pastorally sensitive responses to requests for prayer is cited as an example of “pastoral accommodation.” The test for such accommodations is clearly stated. They do not amount to “redefining marriage from the ground up which [the church] cannot do.” They should “proclaim the form of life given by God’s creative goodness and bring those in difficult positions into closer approximation to it” (49).

The final paragraph has been much criticised but simply stresses the importance of the church upholding its doctrine of marriage as God’s gift in creation and seeking only wise and limited accommodations (rather than redefining marriage). Humans cannot destroy God’s gift but misunderstanding it will distort our behaviour and is liable to produce “frustration and disappointment” and make “the path to fulfilment, in marriage and in other relationships, more difficult to find” (50).

Conclusion

Some criticisms levelled at the document are justified. It is not perfect. It bears marks of relatively hurried production by a group of academic scholars. It has weaknesses arising from the political reality that the drafting group included members sceptical or hostile to arguments that could have strengthened its case. It also faced the challenge of having to appeal to arguments within Christian tradition for sexual differentiation being essential to marriage. This, however, is a view which the tradition has never had to defend before because for two thousand years Christians have understood the witness of creation and Scripture to have been so clear. While criticising it, revisionists have avoided answering its central arguments about sexual differentiation and marriage as God’s gifts in creation and they have not offered a theological alternative.

One weakness not raised by its initial critics is that the document does not explain that those seeking to redefine marriage must offer a better biblical



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and theological account. By seeking to be positive and to avoid debates about homosexuality the report fails to make clear that the first and major hurdle facing those challenging the doctrine that marriage is between one man and one woman is that they are proposing marriage embrace a pattern of sexual relationship Scripture never commends and always identifies as sin.

Despite its weaknesses, the report offers in short compass a clear defence of Anglican and wider Christian teaching. That is why it has been so traduced by those supporting “men and men” and “women and women” in marriage. Supporters of Christian teaching should therefore welcome and build on it to demonstrate the overwhelmingly high ground — in Scripture and tradition — of a vision of “men and women in marriage” and to challenge critics to offer a theological rationale for their alternative and innovative definition. ■

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