

## A Lay Perspective on Marriage and Same Sex Blessings, and the Current Controversy in our Church

In response to our national church's call for study on this issue, and to help myself and my congregation prepare for what promises to be a lively debate on this issue, I have undertaken to write this essay. The purpose of this essay is to present a lay perspective to marriage and the debate on same sex blessings and its implications based on my personal reflection, research, prayer, and discussions and conversations within my home congregation. I found that the more I read, the more questions I began to have. Working on this essay became a personal journey for me.

To begin, I needed to have a definition of marriage. What does marriage mean to me? I discovered that our church's current understanding of marriage dates to 1970, where it is described as a "covenant of fidelity--a dynamic, lifelong commitment of one man and one woman in a personal and sexual union"<sup>1</sup> to be inadequate and instead have a slightly more elaborate understanding of marriage, described in the following paragraphs.

First, as the 1970 statement proclaims, marriage is divinely instituted, intended as part of God's creation,<sup>2</sup> Christ reaffirms God's role in marriage and St. Paul writes that marriage is a "profound mystery"<sup>3</sup> comparing the marriage relationship to Christ and the Church. The Church Fathers also generally understood marriage as a divine ordinance<sup>4,5</sup>. The Augsburg confession reaffirms this belief.<sup>6</sup>

Second, marriage is intended for procreation<sup>7</sup> but a better term could perhaps be propagation, as married couples serve not only for the education of their own children, but of service to others as well.<sup>8</sup> Marriage can therefore still exist without the ability of procreation as it is also to "nourish and train" for "the honour of God."<sup>9</sup>

Third, marriage is intended for intimacy, a term inclusive not only of "marital duty"<sup>10</sup> but of the close sharing of daily life, with all it brings.<sup>11</sup> To Elkanah, for example, marriage to Hannah was more than offspring.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, marriage is intended for companionship<sup>13</sup> for "mutual comfort and help."<sup>14</sup> "Two are better than one" the text for my own wedding's homily began, for "if

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<sup>1</sup> **A Statement on Sex, Marriage, and Family** Adopted by the Fifth Biennial Convention of the Lutheran Church in America, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 25-July 2, 1970

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:20-24

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 5:32

<sup>4</sup> St. Ambrose; "We also do not deny that marriage was sanctified by Christ" *Letter to Siricius*.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, "We do not indeed forbid the union of man and woman, blest by God" *To His Wife* Book I 2:12b

<sup>6</sup> "God himself ... instituted marriage" Augsburg Confession Article XXIII *The Marriage of Priests*

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:28 "God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number" *NIV*

<sup>8</sup> "they may serve those in need and be a sign of the fulfillment of your perfect kingdom" *Rite of Marriage*, Lutheran Book of Worship. See also Luther, Large Catechism, "beget children, and nourish and train them to the honor of God.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, Martin . The Large Catechism, *The Sixth Commandment*

<sup>10</sup> St. Paul, "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband." I Corinthians 7:3 *NIV*

<sup>11</sup> "share with each other your joys and sorrows and all that the years will bring" *Rite of Marriage*, Lutheran Book of Worship

<sup>12</sup> "Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" I Samuel 1:8 *NIV*

<sup>13</sup> "It is not good for man to be alone" Genesis 2:18 *NIV*

one falls down, his friend can help him up”<sup>15</sup> and the Augsburg Confession states “God ordained marriage to be a help against human infirmity.”<sup>16</sup>

Fifthly, marriage is a union of complementary elements, i.e., male and female. Humankind was created male and female in God’s image<sup>17</sup> and in marriage “become one flesh,”<sup>18</sup> male and female are interdependent,<sup>19</sup> and “each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, marriage is intended for sanctification. St. Paul writes that Christian spouses, by virtue of the marriages, sanctify in some way their unbelieving spouses.<sup>21</sup> In the Eastern Christian traditions, marriage is a rite of the church, more than a simple agreement between two individuals. From a very early time, Christians were to seek approval for marriage from their bishop.<sup>22</sup> Marriage is more than a contract, it is a covenant of mutual self-sacrifice, made holy by the Church’s blessing. Marriage by its nature as a covenant reflecting Christ’s covenant becomes a covenant of fidelity. It is not made faithful by mutual agreement, but by the grace of God. This sacramental aspect of marriage, better known in Eastern Christianity, was recently elaborated in an homily by Bagnall.<sup>23</sup> My own wedding homily invoked the presence of God in strengthening the marriage: “though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves” the Preacher writes, “A cord of *three* strands is not quickly broken,”<sup>24</sup> the third strand taken to refer to the role of God in strengthening the marriage.

I must point out that, despite the references, this framework for understanding marriage is not uniquely Christian nor does it necessarily exclude same sex unions except perhaps for the concept of complementarity. Indeed, other essays presented to the national church in support of same sex blessings draw on many of these same elements to provide rationalization for the recognition of same sex partnerships. I felt it necessary, though, to elaborate on my views of marriage in comparison to our current rather brief statement on marriage to justify a call for the Church to take a long look at what marriage means.

As I have demonstrated, marriage in scripture and tradition has always assumed a heterosexual nature. Other essays have dealt with interpretation of scripture regarding homosexuality and I will not venture any opinions on the matter except to call the church to formulate a clear position one way or another on homosexuality. The motion on same sex blessings presented by the NCC clearly agrees, though for probably different reasons,

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<sup>14</sup> *The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage*, The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada.

<sup>15</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:9-11 NIV

<sup>16</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article XXIII, *The Marriage of Priests*

<sup>17</sup> “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” Genesis 1:27 NIV

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 2:24, NIV

<sup>19</sup> St. Paul; “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman” I Corinthians 11:11 NIV

<sup>20</sup> St. Paul, I Corinthians 7:2

<sup>21</sup> St. Paul, “For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.” I Corinthians 7:14 NIV.

<sup>22</sup> “It is right for men and women who are marrying to form their union with the approval of the bishop, in order that their marriage may be in accordance with the Lord’s will” Ignatius, *To Polycarp* 33.

<sup>23</sup> Bagnall, Ronald. *Wedding Sermon*, Lutheran Forum Fall 2004, 40-41.

<sup>24</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:12 NIV

that our current statements are inadequate. However, the motion, if passed, would have us discard our statement and enact major changes in policy on social issues *before* a sound theological and confessional basis for these changes can be presented. A “compromise” or “local option” is included in the motion to accommodate those congregations who dissent. In essence, though, the motion presents the following:

1. The Church’s current practice and understanding on homosexuality and homosexual behaviour is probably in error. Therefore, any disapproval of homosexuality and homosexual behaviour must therefore be suspended until the Church can come up with a new comprehensive statement.
2. The Church approve blessing of same-sex couples subject to approval on a local basis by the pastor and the congregation in consultation with the bishop. This appears to endorse the view that same sex blessing is a ceremony of local importance not crucial to our understanding of the gospel and therefore ‘adiaphora.’
3. The church will therefore develop an approved rite for same sex blessings forthwith. This implies therefore that, local congregational dissension notwithstanding, the Church as a collective unity will be in full approval of same sex blessings.

I would like to respond to the proposed motion with the following set of observations:

1. The real issue in the church is whether or not all homosexual behaviour is sinful. Approval of same sex blessings, even as a “local option’ would be recognition that the church approves of homosexual behaviour within certain limits analogous to heterosexual behaviour. Rightly or wrongly, this is a major paradigm shift, comparable to questions of the divinity of Christ, the introduction of infant baptism, and certainly a more fundamental change than, for example, the ordination of women.
2. In the past, major paradigm shifts in the past have occurred more slowly, and the Church has always lagged behind society, adopting reluctantly these major social changes, sometimes only after several generations.
3. The motion would establish implicit recognition and approval of homosexual behaviour *before* such behaviour is internalized as normal by society, scriptural reference, and liturgical practice by the vast majority of individual members.
4. The argument that such a rite should be ‘adiaphora’ is problematic to me. The definition of ‘adiaphora’ in the Lutheran Confessions “rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God but which have been introduced into the church with a good intention for the sake of good order and propriety, or otherwise to maintain Christian discipline”<sup>25</sup> I believe that a good many people, rightly or wrongly, would dispute the claim that same sex blessing would invite “good order,” “propriety,” or “maintain Christian discipline.”
5. The argument that same sex blessings are simply “adiaphora” further loses merit, if, as Fogleman suggests<sup>26</sup>, denial of same sex marriage is contradictory to our understanding of grace. The issue, then, no longer becomes an issue of adiaphora

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<sup>25</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article X, “Adiaphora”

<sup>26</sup> Fogleman, 2004.

- but of justification and therefore our understanding of the Gospel and does become an issue for church unity.<sup>27</sup>
6. Because many people on both sides of the issue, would therefore see this issue not as a matter of adiaphora but of understanding the Gospel, many would see whatever the contrary opinion as anathema.
  7. Other writers, and the recent example in the Anglican community, have amply demonstrated that approval of same sex blessings would have profound ecumenical implications. On the other hand, non-approval of same sex blessings would have little impact on our ecumenical relations.
  8. The “local option” would not preserve church unity as some in our church would certainly view approval of same sex blessings as contradictory to Scripture and sever fellowship. On the other hand, there are some who would hold defeat of the motion would be contrary to the Gospel and regard it is a rejection of *their* fellowship. To recall the example of Paul and the “Jewish party,” this was not a local option, varying from place to place. The result was a complete divergence with the Jewish Christians ultimately viewed as heretical.

In view of these observations, careful reflection, and re-examination of the institution of marriage, I have come to the following conclusions.

1. The Church needs to carefully study the entire topic of human sexuality and present a clear statement of the church’s understanding of human sexuality, consistent with our understanding of the Gospel. The Church will need to carefully discern what is truly evangelical and what is simply pressure to conform to society.
2. The Church needs to carefully re-examine the institution of marriage and its place within the church. A case could be made for separating the Church entirely from the estate of marriage, following a literal interpretation of Luther’s views on marriage as expounded by Kelly<sup>28</sup> and Kleiner.<sup>29</sup> Marriage would then become simply a civil matter, the definition and regulation being left to the state, leaving blessings of such to be simply a personal matter not needing church approval at all.
3. The Church needs to carefully observe the experience of same sex unions in the civil sphere before introduction of same sex unions within the church. If the introduction of civil same sex unions occurs smoothly and orderly, this would provide support for a Christian view of same sex unions “for good order and propriety.” On the other hand, if civil same sex unions result in widespread disorder and disrepute, there certainly would be little justification therefore of its introduction in the Church.
4. The Church should generally err on the side of conservatism, that is, no change in policy until it can be clearly demonstrated that same sex blessings are first of all congruent with the gospel, and second, desirous for the sake of good order and decorum. To introduce ceremonies and rites into the Church without such demonstration would be reckless at best and folly at worst.

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<sup>27</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article VII, Of the Church

<sup>28</sup> Kelly, Robert A. Toward a Lutheran Theology of Marriage. November 2004

<sup>29</sup> Kleiner, John W. How Do Lutherans View Marriage? November 2004

I believe at this juncture that approval of the motion as it currently stands would be so divisive that our national church would fragment and weaken. I furthermore believe that the Church should not obstruct the state in its regulation of civil unions, homosexual or otherwise, and that the Church can learn from the experience of the state in this grand social experiment. Perhaps after a generation of experience with same sex unions in the wider society would open same sex unions to wider acceptance within the Church. I will therefore side with Rabbi Gemaliel and say “Leave them alone! If what they have planned and done is of human origin, it will disappear, but if it comes from God, you cannot possibly defeat them.”<sup>30</sup>

Daniel Glaeske, B. Sc., M.D.

Member, Messiah Lutheran Church, Assiniboia, Saskatchewan

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<sup>30</sup> Acts 5:38-39.