

“The Gospel and Equal Marriage” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 17 May 2015 by Kerry Enright. The sermon draws on material from Mark Achtemeier’s book - “The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage - An Evangelical’s Change of Heart”

This is the final sermon in a series of four. The first one was about how to read the Bible thoughtfully and sensibly. The second was about how God values our whole lives, body, mind, spirit. Last week I spoke about how God pushes beyond human made frontiers, human made categorising, accepted truths, stretching out to include new groups of people beyond people of Jewish faith eventually to embrace Gentiles, despite the extent to which that inclusion changed the nature of Christianity. I also talked about Old Testament passages often used in this discussion.

A context for tonight’s sermon is that yesterday, the Church of Scotland voted to accept that congregations could call ministers who were in civil unions.

Tonight I want to speak about one particular New Testament text, often used in the discussion about equal marriage.

I would like to refer to Romans 1.

In Romans, Paul argues that because all human beings have fallen under the power of sin, all human beings stand in need of the forgiving grace of God. Paul is saying that even God-fearing people rely on the grace of God offered in Christ. He says that Greco-Roman pagans have deliberately rejected the true God from the centre of their lives and have substituted creatures, idols in the shape of created animals and people, as the objects of their religious devotion. He says this perverse choice causes the rest of their life to unravel as well.

But then he says ... “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on one another, you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” 2:1

Paul’s point is that in self-righteously passing judgment on their pagan neighbours, his pious hearers also substitute creatures for God at the centre of their lives. They have taken on the role of judge themselves instead of leaving it to God. So, they are no better than pagans who use idols, for they have made an idol of their own judgement. Paul says that in condemning our neighbours, we put created beings, ourselves, on the throne of judgement that belongs properly to God.

Remember this society had no concept of sexual orientation.

When writing of unravelling relationships, Paul had in mind many unhealthy activities – military victors raped prisoners of war; masters took advantage of slaves; homosexual prostitution was practised as part of pagan worship; young boys provided sexual favours to older men in exchange for philosophical training and social patronage. There was a whole system of pederasty and it was a rite of passage for boys of a particular social class. The Roman imperial household abused victims of both genders.

None of the same sex behaviours prominent in the first century showed any sense of proper, respectful and equal relationships. They were violent or sacrilegious or exploitative. These are a world away from covenanted, faithful same-sex or heterosexual relationships.

Paul is right in that turning one's back on morality, divine guidance and societal common sense in favour of ungovernable passions is still a recipe for disaster.

Much more could be said about other Biblical passages often referred to.

I want to move to a second point.

As followers of Jesus, we are invited to test the spirits of our time.

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

Mark Achtemeier found four strands coming together.

1. The way in which gay people are condemned and judged using passages from scripture, and thereby suffer, seems to contradict the Biblical injunction to bear fruit of the Spirit and to reflect the nature of God.
2. Gay relationships can fulfil, just as heterosexual relationships can, what we believe to be God's purposes for marriage.
3. The Biblical witness is that God seems willing to bless relationships that depart from the majority pattern of male and female.
4. The Biblical witness is that God delights in blessing people outside the customary way of doing things and the accepted categories of the time. Which is why those of us who are Gentiles are able to be counted among the people of God.

This morning I spoke about the prayer Jesus prays for his disciples. I talked about how God's self-giving was at the core of our living, that each and every day, God gives God's self to us. That flows into our relationships, so self-giving is our way of being. God's self-giving, and our self-giving has two by-products, joy and community.

So where we see self-giving in relationships, God seems to bless them. Marriage is a celebration of total giving of self to other. Relationships are discouraged where such self-giving is not possible, for example, extramarital relationships. That is also why there are limits on marriage. We need to be free to give ourselves totally to another person. This principle applies to both homosexual and heterosexual relationships. Relationships are blessed where people are able to grow in mutuality, in self-giving, when a relationship is free and unhindered.

Achtemeier notes there is a precedent for taking the step of reviewing previous interpretations as a result of changed context. He refers to what John Calvin did in Geneva in the 1500s. It concerned the practice of usury, of receiving interest payments on loans and deposits. Up to Calvin's time, the Church had condemned receiving interest payments on money placed in the hands of another person. There were plenty of Bible passages condemning such practices, from both the Old and New Testaments.

An example - "But love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return." (Luke 6.35)

Then circumstances changed and people in Geneva needed to borrow money for capital development. Well-to-do Christians were willing to lend money to merchants and business-people. So Calvin looked at the intent behind these passages. He noted the OT passages especially were

written for agricultural economies, where poor people had to borrow in order to survive a poor harvest. When lenders used the farmer's circumstances to make a larger profit, the Bible called it oppressive.

Putting things in context helped Calvin see that a long-standing prohibition, biblically based and theologically argued, needed reconsideration in a different context. The Biblical writers never imagined that people would one day want to lend money to people who already had money. This is what he said:

"It follows that the gain which he who lends his money upon interest acquires, without doing injury to anyone, is not to be included under the heading of usury."

There was much more to it than I can indicate, but the principle applies. The Bible needed to be interpreted in light of new social developments.

So ...

1. God means for human beings to flourish in their relationships and in their care for each other.
2. God does not mean for people to be alienated from God.
3. Biblical passages used to condemn homosexual relationships need to be read in their context and within the broad pattern of biblical teaching.
4. Life relies on God giving God's self to us and we are blessed in being able also to give ourselves totally to another, the dynamic at the centre of marriage and the reason there are limits on marriage.
5. God keeps reaching from one frontier to another, in reaching out to people, and in valuing who they are, to the point that even we Gentiles are regarded as children of God. This is the nature of God.
6. There is good precedent in our tradition for taking into account new social developments in how we interpret the Bible.
7. There is every reason for marriage to be regarded as equally appropriate, for heterosexual and homosexual couples.