

Theological Conversation About Marriage

South Moreton Presbytery, Oct 31st 2018

Presentations from Geoff Thompson

Opening Statement

A conviction about the theological rightness of same-gender marriage is not one to be held lightly. It is a novel conviction that represents a willingness to understand gender, marriage and creation differently than has hitherto been the case in the Christian community.

For me, coming to that conviction has involved a measure of intellectual and theological wrestling. It was not, for instance, a position I would have held a decade ago.

That wrestling has involved another conviction: that same-sex marriage must, as with all other moral positions of the church, be seen to emerge from and be consistent with the gospel of the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus and embodied in his life, death and resurrection. That has been my benchmark.

Therefore, I have not come to my position merely by way of concerns about justice, rights or inclusion. Yes, each of those is relevant and important, but on their own and/or abstracted from the gospel framework they cannot, in my view, be decisive for the church's thinking about this matter.

So what is this gospel which constitutes this framework? I would articulate it in the following terms.

The gospel is the announcement that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God has confirmed Israel's messianic hope, albeit in an unexpected way. In his sayings and parables, his acts of healing and forgiveness, his practices of hospitality, compassion and solidarity – a solidarity culminating in his self-sacrifice on the cross – Jesus inaugurated this hoped-for kingdom. Though his witness to the kingdom was rejected even by those closest to him, God confirmed it in raising him from the dead, vindicating him in the face of human rejection, confirming that the death and evil which stalk creation do not – and will not – have the last word. In sending the Spirit and thus forming a community of witnesses, God formed the church to embody and point to this kingdom amidst all manner of cultures, languages,

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places and races. It is the mission of those communities to proclaim the kingdom, and to welcome any and all to share in its forgiveness, reconciliation and hope – a hope of a new heaven and a new earth.

In this summary I believe I have reflected the big-picture, narrative and theological framework of the New Testament writings.

These are the threads that can be seen to weave their way through the pages of the New Testament and, at some level, to hold together the diverse emphases and theologies contained in those pages.

Of course, our presenting issue today is the place and understanding of sex, gender and marriage in this kingdom and in the forms of life which this new community generated.

And also of course, we are concerned with the place, understanding and use of scripture in this kingdom. We will be addressing scripture more deliberately as today's sessions unfold, but I will say this for now: what we say about scripture, how we interpret it, and what we use it for, must be framed by this kingdom framework and its novelty.

The first Christians had no clear script for how to form Christian communities. Jesus had so radically re-interpreted Jewish hope that his first followers were constantly re-interpreting the Old Testament, and in the process of doing so were producing a new body of writings which would eventually become their own, and now our, scriptures.

There is a very real sense that Christianity was being invented on the run. In saying that I'm not suggesting it was cavalier. Indeed, everything suggests that it was a deeply serious process. But such maps as they had were rather fragmentary.

Equipped with the proclamation of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, smaller and larger collections of his remembered teachings and activities, and the experience of the Spirit – Christianity emerged as something unpredictable and unexpected.

Let me give two examples of how we can see early Christianity taking shape.

The first relates to the delayed Parousia. The second relates to sex and marriage.

1. From all indications Jesus led his disciples to expect an imminent consummation of history. His teachings about the coming of the Son of Man – the figure associated

with the end of history – all suggested that this was not far off (e.g. Mark 13: 24-27). That history was continuing longer than Jesus had indicated – and believed – it would, required significant theological adjustment within the pages of the New Testament.¹ Strikingly, that adjustment involved a notable lack of embarrassment in maintaining the memory of Jesus’ explicit teachings about the matter whilst not being controlled by them as the realities of unexpected circumstances pressed upon them.

2. The need to develop ethics on the spot is arguably nowhere clearer than it is in Paul’s instructions about sex, marriage and divorce in 1 Cor 7. Asked for advice on these matters, Paul’s response is a mixture what he thinks is wise and then certain specific instructions. Apart from Jesus’ teachings on divorce, Paul is unable to appeal to any teachings of Jesus about sex or marriage. Nor does he invoke any Old Testament instructions on sexual practices (which were by no means lacking). Why not? Because he is working out of a new, previously untested framework – the framework of God’s renewal of creation.² He was speaking into a culture where sex could mean either anything or nothing. Paul was helping the Corinthian Christians – at that time and that place – to invest sex and marriage with meaning defined by his understanding of Christ’s kingdom, even as that transformed the prevailing meaning and practices of sex. In doing so, Paul laid the foundation for the Christian view that marriage is a form of sanctification,³ a means by which we are helped to conform the desire we share with another to the way of Christ.⁴

¹ For a summary of the different eschatologies present in the New Testament and how they reflect different responses to the ‘delayed parousia’ see Richard Bauckham, “The Delay of the Parousia,” in *The Jewish World Around the New Testament: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 5-88. For an overview of the implications of the early Christians response to this issue for the life and witness of contemporary Christians, see Christopher M. Hays, “Conclusion: A Fourfold Response to the Delay of the Parousia,” in *When the Son of Man Didn’t Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia*, eds Christopher M. Hays et al, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2016), 253-268.

² The same Christ-shaped modification of and response to prevailing cultural norms can be observed in the reformulation of prevailing domestic and family arrangements in Col 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5: 22-6:9; and 1 Peter 3:1-7.

³ On the question of the legacy bequeathed by these teachings see Kyle Harper, “The First Sexual Revolution: How Christianity Transformed the Ancient World,” *First Things*, January 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/01/the-first-sexual-revolution> Unlike Harper, I would argue that the ‘first revolution’ constitutes a theological justification for further continuing trajectories of Christianising sexual practices in other cultures rather than (as Harper argues) the revolution establishing a new status quo.

⁴ See more on this issue of marriage as a form of properly directing desire, see my remarks in Topic 3 of this seminar.

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I believe our calling today, in a culture where likewise sex and marriage can mean anything or nothing, is to develop understandings of sex and marriage that allow them to be formed and shaped according to the kingdom of God.

For a combination of reasons that will be discussed as the afternoon unfolds, I am not convinced that same-sex sexual practices are themselves contrary to the shape of the kingdom of God and that, accordingly, it is appropriate that same-sex couples should – no more and no less than heterosexual couples – be able to receive the gift of Christian marriage by which their relationships and the place of sex within those relationships is conformed to the virtues of the kingdom of God.

Theme 1

Christology and Scripture⁵

If Jesus of Nazareth had not been interpreted as Israel's Messiah there would, of course, be no Christian Bible. That he was so interpreted is why the Christian community generated this two-volume collection of literature. The bible – as the collection of both the traditional Jewish and new early Christian literature – is therefore a theological statement in itself. It is a statement of convictions about monotheism, about the unity of creation and redemption, about Israel's hope and its fulfilment. The bible sitting on a lectern or being processed into the church is, therefore, by its very existence, already pointing to those particular theological convictions even before a verse of it is read.

It is important to note that it was not the Bible which produced Christian belief. Rather, the Bible emerged during the second and third centuries in the process of clarifying the details of the Christian faith which was already being proclaimed. In other words, it was because you believed certain things about Jesus and God that led you to believe certain things about the Bible. The production of the Bible and the production of early Christian theology were mutually informing processes.

If this interpretation of Jesus explains the existence of the Christian Bible, so too is this interpretation of Jesus is the theologically controlling centre of the Bible and is most visible in the four Gospels located together at the beginning of the New Testament.

To use the language of a controlling centre can also help us resist some images of the Bible and employ alternatives. For instance the Bible is not a flat text which we interpret with a one-verse one vote hermeneutics. On the other hand, with the messianic interpretation of Jesus the centre, the Bible is better imagined as a circle, or perhaps even better, a three-dimensional revolving globe. From that revolving globe which emerge certain centrifugal tangents spinning out from the centre, some of which peter out in a whimper,⁶ some whose

⁵ Most of what is argued in this section I have presented at much greater length in my *Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many* (Northcote: Uniting Academic Press, 2016), 65-86 and "How to Read the Bible: On the Use and Misuse of the Bible in the Same-Sex Marriage Debate," ABC Religion and Ethics, Sep 4th 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/how-to-read-the-bible-on-the-use-and-misuse-of-the-bible-in-the-/10095424> .

⁶ For instance, it is arguable that the content of 3 John and Jude never assumed any particular profile in shaping the imagination of the Christian community.

darkness is overwhelmed by the brightness of the centre,⁷ and others compellingly present themselves as more forcefully and obviously propelled from the centre.⁸

Protestant liberals and conservatives have both been shaped by the trend, which emerged in the Reformation, to isolate the Bible as an authority – as if we believe the gospel because we first believe in the Bible. Abstracting the bible from a wider doctrinal framework of Israel's faith and Christian hope produced fundamentalism and modern liberal biblical scholarship in equal measure. Both abstracted the texts of the bible from their Christological and ecclesial framework.⁹

It is a tragedy that discussions about the bible in the Uniting Church have been shaped by taking sides on this two fold development of the Reformation. In doing so we have largely side-stepped the calling of Paragraph 5 of the Basis of Union to subvert that binary and to read the Bible in the context of the doctrines of Christ, Church and the Spirit. Both sides of that binary reduce the bible to a 'text' and have failed to treat it as a 'witness.'¹⁰

('Witness' is an immensely important theological category with application well beyond the doctrine and interpretation of scripture. Nevertheless, in the present discussion about scripture, it combines, in a way that 'text' cannot and does not, the combination of divine initiative and human agency so central to our engagement with and listening to scripture. Witnesses – theological or otherwise – are only important because of their capacity to point to something that they did not initiate. Yet their work of witnessing remains their own work, conditioned by, but not reducible to, their own possibilities and limitations.)

⁷ A notable example in this regard would be the narrative of the rape, murder and dismemberment of the unnamed concubine in Judges 19.

⁸ Obviously, Paul's theological wrestling with the theological significance of Jesus' messianic sufferings would be the prime example of this trajectory.

⁹ John Webster's, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003) presents a strong case for the roots of this tendency in the Reformation.

¹⁰ The notion of the bible as a 'text' may seem so self-evident that it might seem perverse to question it. But the notion the Bible is a collection of 'texts' which invite any or every method of interpretation in the manner other texts is a modern invention. It is a further manifestation of the abandonment of a theological framing of the Bible generally and of its constituent components. It reflects moves within the modern Western academy which, far from being neutral, are theologically- and philosophically- loaded and should not be immune to intellectual interrogation. For one angle on this particular episode in the history of reading the Bible, see Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

To understand the Bible Christologically does not mean that every verse in the Bible has some hidden Christological meaning.¹¹ It simply means that we read the bible in the context of Christ's ongoing history with the church and the world. That most contemporary Christians see the biblical representations of, for instance, slavery, women, and violence, differently than Christians of other ages is because we are participants in a history of interpretation in which the church's reading of the Bible. This history of reading is shaped by prayer, the church's culturally- and socially-diverse experiences, and the witness of particular Christians. As Paragraph 5 says: "the Word of God is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the church."

A Christological reading of the Bible makes us alert to the dynamics (many of them tension-filled) internal to the Bible, alert to the dangers of inflated confidence in our own exegetical efforts, and alert to the surprises that occur when one of those centrifugal tangents spins out of the centre and we wonder why we haven't seen and felt it before.

¹¹ This is why the present proposal is not a simplistic return to allegorical readings of the Bible (not that such readings should be dismissed summarily). It is to point, instead, to the reality of the ongoing history of reading the Bible along the lines of the various trajectories that spin out from its centre, to do so in the company of other Christians, and with the awareness of the contingency of all our readings.

Theme 2

Humanity, Sexuality and Creation's Order

The most fundamental claim about Creation from the Jewish and Christian's perspective is its goodness – seminally and paradigmatically articulated in Genesis 1. For the Jewish people exiled in Babylon and confronted with that empire's myths, and then for Christians resisting Gnosticism (and later, Manichaeism), the goodness of creation was a highly radical, counter-cultural claim, and a claim that was by no means self-evident.¹²

In both cases the claim about the goodness of creation functioned as a confession of the goodness of matter against contrary claims of its evil. For both Jews and Christians, claims about the goodness of creation are embedded in wider claims about monotheism and the unity of creation and redemption.

As this goodness of creation is articulated in Genesis 1, the issue is that creation is made fit for the purpose God has given it.

Against this background, a key question is whether what appear to be certain 'orders of creation' are the only pointers to its goodness. The question is crucial given the classical view that marriage – and the gender distinction and the same sex attraction which it classically assumes – is an order of creation; that is, something that comes with the goodness of creation.

The Christian faith has largely answered yes, doing so often by reinforcing an appeal to Genesis 1 with Paul's argument in Romans 1. But as the [Report of the Doctrine Working Group](#) argued, the biblical witness is not itself uniform on this issue.¹³ In Job and Ecclesiastes the idea that the ordering of creation to God's purposes is not limited by what we see in visible or apparent order. Job points to the goodness of the seemingly disordered phenomenon of the ostrich – a creature with wings but which can't fly (see Job 39: 13-18). The author of Ecclesiastes, in response to his failed effort to find connections between nature, justice and God's will, cries out, "Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (Eccl 7:13). Both these authors bear witness to a conviction that the

¹² Noting that the goodness of creation is not self-evident and is itself a confession of faith needs to be emphasised given the ease with which, notwithstanding technological damage to creation, the notion of beauty and intimations of design in creation easily obscure a true confrontation with the violence, suffering and disorder which characterises the physical world.

¹³ See *B23 Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships*, pp. 32-35.

goodness of creation is reflected not merely in what we perceive to be its apparent order, but in the diversity which has its origin in God.

Something like this was acknowledged long ago by St. Augustine:

We, for our part, can see no beauty [in certain features of creation] to give us delight; and the reason is that we are involved in a section of it, under the condition of mortality, and so we cannot observe the whole design, in which these small parts, which are to us so disagreeable, fit together to make a scheme of ordered beauty. Hence the right course for us, when faced with things in which we are ill-equipped to contemplate God's providential design, is to obey the command to believe in the Creator's providence.¹⁴

This is why we can make room for discoveries of the physical world, which may not be immediately obvious to us, to inform our understanding of the goodness of creation. It is why, I believe, that it is possible to conceive of a gender diversity (greater than the seemingly obvious binary of male and female) being part of the goodness of creation.

This argument seems, however, to hit a brick wall in the case of the persistent biblical prohibitions against same-gender sexual activity. Any hitherto unknown or unrecognised goodness of creation does not, so it seems, extend either to same sex attraction or to sexual activity between people of the same gender.

Much ink has been spilt the interpretation of the Greek words, *arsenokoita*, and *malakoi* in 1 Cor 6: 9-11 and 1 Tim 1:9-10. The only comment I would add to the seemingly irresolvable scholarly disputes about these terms is the observation that none of these condemnations are stand-alone condemnations. In these passages, the specific condemnations of same-sex activity or of those who engage in such activity take their place in lists of sins, all the others of which are manifestly human practices which harm other people. These acts do not dishonour God in the abstract. The dishonour God because they tear the fabric of human community.¹⁵

¹⁴ Saint Augustine, *City of God* (London: Penguin, 2003), 475.

¹⁵ It is also important to note that these so-called 'vice lists' serve as markers of community differentiation between Jews and Gentiles. As such, they invite many interpretative questions in relation to their theological rationale, their polemical function and rhetorical force. Whilst these issues, in themselves, do not settle the question of the continuing relevance or authority of the prohibitions against same-sex activity, it is a pointer to the reality that ethical instruction in the New Testament is bound up with complex social and ethnic realities which do not directly or automatically transfer to other contexts.

This a reminder that Christian thinking about godliness and ungodliness is not simply reducible to a divine-command theory. It is not simply framed by law, command, obedience and disobedience. Think of these examples:

- Jesus' appeal to Hosea – "I desire mercy not sacrifice" – an appeal he makes to justify his disciples breaking the law of the Sabbath (Matt 12:7)
- Jesus' summary of the law – as love of God and love of neighbour (Matt 22:34-40 c.f. Matt 8:12, and echoed, interestingly, without including the first command in Rom 13: 8-10)
- His teaching that good fruit can only be produced by a good tree (Matt 7:15-20; Luke 6:43-45.)

Christian thinking about sin cannot depend only on invoking lists of commands or condemnations. Our thinking about the godliness or otherwise of particular acts must make room for the link between those acts and their fruits. To put the matter technically, there is a 'consequentialist' dimension to Christian ethics, one that has its roots in Jesus' own approach to holiness and obedience.

I'd also add this point – one that combines this understanding of sin with the inscrutable diversity of God's good creation. The line between sin and righteousness does not follow the line we might perceive between order and disorder. Indeed the doctrine of original sin – against all moralistic account of sins - points precisely to the pervasiveness of sin across all lines that we seek to draw between sin and righteousness.

Much more could be said, but for present purposes, my point is that the contemporary Christian moral assessment of same-gender sexual acts must, at a minimum, isolate those acts from the assumption that they necessarily belong with other acts which necessarily cause harm.

Theme 3

Marriage: What is it biblically and theologically?

Is there a biblical view on marriage? Strictly speaking ‘no,’ at least not if we pay any attention to the range of marriage practices endorsed – even commanded – in the Bible. These range from monogamy to polygamy (e.g., Jacob, Leah and Rachel) and concubinage (e.g. Solomon and his three hundred concubines; 1 Kings 11:3); from Levirate marriage (Gen 38:6), to marriages between slaves arranged by slave owners (Ex 21:4), and to legally-required marriages between a rape victim and her rapist (Deut 22: 28-29).

My point in highlighting this is *not* to say that anything goes, or to deliberately trivialise appeals to ‘the biblical view of marriage,’ or to bypass the view that marriage in the bible assumes a union of male and female. *But it is to say* that the traditional Christian teaching on marriage is just that. It is Christian teaching, developed through theological arguments which are always more complex than merely appealing to this or that biblical warrant or precedent. Christian doctrines of marriage emerge as the church combines the different elements and purposes of marriage which are included or implied in the biblical witnesses.¹⁶

These elements are usually drawn from Gen 1 and 2; Jesus’ teachings on divorce in Matt 5:32-32 and 19:3-12, and Mark 10:2-12, Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 7, and his appeal to the analogy between marriage and Christ’s relationship to the church in Ephesians 5 25:33.

Yet it would also have to be said that Christian doctrines or teachings about marriage have combined these in various ways, privileging one more than other, and always being shaped – both positively and negatively – by prevailing cultural norms about marriage and gender.

What are some of the ways in which we combine them today?

- We have given more weight to the companionship highlighted in Genesis 2 which has often been played down in favour of the reproductive stress of Genesis 1.
- Following Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, we have honoured sex for its own good and pleasure beyond its role in reproduction. We’ve come to see marriage not so much as

¹⁶ For an excellent and highly-illuminating case study of this phenomenon, via a study of the developments in the marriage service in the Anglican Communion, see Gillian Varcoe, “Marriage” in *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer*, eds., Cynthia Shattuck and Charles C. Heffling, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 509-517.

structure to *control* our desires, but to receive it as a way of *nurturing* our desires for another in the context of our desire for God.

- We are more conscious of the impulse for equality in male-female relationships present in (but often obscured from) 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5. Indisputably, Christianity has too often and too easily ignored or suppressed that impulse. But, arguably it is the most original and unique dimension of early Christian writings on marriage.

These are things that theological reflection on marriage brings to the surface. It is not simply an institution that is justified by its existence or divine ordering. Theological reflection on the biblical material allows us to see that – in the words of Augustine – there are goods to marriage, even if we have expanded the goods beyond Augustine's three (namely procreation, fidelity and permanence).¹⁷ Rather than speaking of marriage as an institution or on order, it is better to speak of marriage as a gift of creation and as locus of sanctification.¹⁸

The reference to Augustine's goods of marriage draws our attention to the question of divorce and remarriage. Many protestant churches, obviously including the UCA, and the Eastern Orthodox churches, have qualified the teaching about the permanence of marriage and set aside the prohibition on remarriage that has been attached to it. Not only is this a departure from Augustine's teaching, it is also, more importantly, a departure from Jesus' teaching about the indissolubility of marriage and his prohibition against remarriage of divorced peoples. And we have even gone beyond the one exception Jesus is remembered to have made to that prohibition – namely, a marriage that breaks down because of adultery (Matt 19:9). In the Uniting Church we have come to the view that in this broken world, marriages break down irretrievably. And, though contrary to the law of Jesus' teaching, it is consistent with the Spirit of the kingdom he proclaimed for those marriages to be ended and to free the partners for the possibility of a second marriage.

¹⁷ See Augustine, "The Good of Marriage" in *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, edited and translated by Charles T. Wilcox (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 3-54.

¹⁸ For an developed account of marriage as a form of sanctification, or *ascesis*, and therefore of its availability to same-gender couples see Eugene F Rogers Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999). Also see Rogers' brief essay along these lines, but more limited to the way same-gender marriages can embody the good of complementarity, "Same-sex complementarity: A theology of marriage," *The Christian Century*, May 11, 2011, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-04/same-sex-complementarity>

Behind this readiness to allow second marriages exposes another aspect of marriage. Drawing on both creation accounts in Genesis, we can theologically affirm that that community and companionship are part of being human. Divorce may well damage the gift of marriage, but our view of God's forgiveness and compassion revealed in Jesus means that we can consider that the damage we cause to the gift does not mean that God does not offer us the gift again. Indeed, that surely is the very logic of the gospel. The gospel that teaches us that God is not grudging but who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for all of us. Would this God not give a divorced person a second chance at companionship and intimacy, the desire for which belongs to their very being with which they were created? The Uniting Church has answered yes to that question.

Does the flexibility of marriage, so understood, extend to same-sex couples? Let me re-frame that question in terms I have used. Can the gift of marriage be given to same-sex couples? I could only answer 'no' if I was convinced that gender difference and procreation were central to the definition of this gift. On gender difference, as I argued in the Topic 2 above, it's my position that the relational structure of the human creature is more diverse than the binary of male and female.¹⁹ Of procreation I would argue that it takes its place within, and is not foundational for, the other dimensions of marriage: companionship, intimacy, mutuality, fidelity, social stability, and for Christians, the sanctifying ordering of all those features towards the will of God lived out in the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus.

The history of Christian teaching on marriage is a history of combining these elements in various and changing ways. I believe that they can be combined to embrace same-gender marriage.

¹⁹ Therefore I read the place of gender binary in Gen 1:27b and 2:24-25 more as paradigmatic of the human community and its vocation rather than as prescriptive for the forms of human relationships.

Theme 4

Catholicity and Unity

The cluster of questions that have been formulated as the presenting one for this theme hold in common that they have no easy answer. And there are no readily available formulas with which to answer them. Catholicity? Substance of the faith? Unity? And we could add ‘orthodoxy.’

The reality is that each of these terms is contested in its definition even by those who agree that each of them is important. Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox may all agree that catholicity is a mark of the church. But in a divided church the concept is more of a summons, or a certain kind of protocol, than it is clearly defined.

Catholicity by its very nature assumes diversity – for it points to that which holds diversity together, that which allows different parts of the whole to recognise that they share in the whole. Catholicity does not mean homogeneity.

Of course, ‘substance of the faith’ is closely related to the notion of orthodoxy. And how do we define that? It is like the trunk of a tree, or is it the trunk plus all or some of the branches as well?

Nevertheless, doctrinal orthodoxy is perhaps easier to specify than the other terms before us. I would argue that historically, and for the vast majority of churches today, Christian doctrinal orthodoxy is located in classic Christological and Trinitarian confessions: Jesus is fully God and fully Human, and claim that God is three but one.

Of course these are not just archaic formulas. Nor are they merely historically-accidental products of the power plays of the early church. Each of them, in their own way, points to the radical views about God, creation, humanity and salvation which Christianity introduced into the ancient world. They are, I would further argue, very closely related to the summary of the gospel I presented in my opening statement. But to unpack that would require more time than is available now.

In our present conversation the point of contention is how close, necessary, and logical are the connections between these two core doctrines and marriage, and whether those

connections – be they close or distant – lead only to the traditional view of marriage as between a man and woman.

But let me make this discussion about orthodoxy and the substance of the faith more specific to the UCA. I will do so via three points:

1. In the Basis of Union, the faith and unity of the one, holy Catholic and apostolic church is said to be “described in this Basis” (Para 14). *There is no external definition of that faith and unity.* It is confessed in the *Basis* to guide the members of the Uniting Church in their adherence to the faith and unity of the church catholic. The focus of that guidance is Paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. These paragraphs declare what the Uniting Church believes the church believes! Those paragraphs relate to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, his work of reconciliation, his calling of the church to mission, his rule and constant renewal of the church to that end, and baptism and the Lord’s supper as the two particular commanded visible acts which proclaim the gospel.

If it is used in the Uniting Church, the formula ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ needs to be filled out with reference to the convictions of these paragraphs.

2. The Uniting Church’s understanding of its ecumenical commitments has never entailed the surrender of its liberty to dissent from what might be a larger ecumenical consensus. Indeed, the very act of union – a as a witness to a hope for a larger union - included commitments to matters that were in tension with convictions regarded by our ecumenical partners as close to the substance of the faith: the ordination of women being the most prominent. Understandings of baptism, the Lord’s Supper and ministry were, and remain, points of contention. These particular beliefs of the Uniting Church have not prevented constructive relationships with a wide range of ecumenical partners.
3. On the question of same-gender marriage, clearly this is a minority position in the church catholic. But it is just that: a *minority* position; globally, it is neither unique nor an outlier position. We are not the only church that has moved in this direction; and we will not be the last.

Let me say a little more about this third point. Those of us who support what is a minority position, should not pretend that it is not a minority position, or that is ever likely to become a majority position. Nor should we justify the UCA's adoption of it as being in some sense a sign of being 'on the right side of history.' Its justification must be theological and grounded in convictions about discerning the will of God. At the same time, noting that we are not alone in wrestling with the matter of same-gender marriage invites all of us to acknowledge that there are dissenters in the majority churches who have been encouraged, inspired and strengthened by this decision of the Uniting Church. Appeals to the 'catholicity' of the church on this matter go both ways.

That diversity in the Uniting Church that has again been brought to light by the Assembly decision is not unique to the uniting Church. They reflect divisions which are played out across the world church. The decision to adopt two definitions of marriage reflects not just the diversity of the Uniting Church but, in reality, the diversity of the world church. This decision of the Uniting Church gives us a glimpse of what the world church looks like today.

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