

Marriage – is it necessarily between a man and a woman?

Now that it is legally possible in England and Wales for two men or two women to marry, it is important to understand the Church's reasons for teaching that marriage is a union between one woman and one man.

Male–female difference is stressed in both creation accounts, in Genesis 1 and 2. In the first account (Genesis 1:26–27), emphasis is laid on the fact that men and women are both made in the image of God. Some Christian interpreters have read a reference to the Trinity into this (although this is not what the original writer would have intended directly) – the idea being that just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different persons but one in their divinity, humanity reflects or images this by being truly different sexes yet truly one humanity. Either way, it is clear in this passage that it is only together that men and women reflect God.

Another feature of this story is its emphasis on procreation as part of what God intends for human sexual differentiation, although it is possible to over-emphasise this in a way which undermines the value of childless marriages. Such marriages are still marriages, of course, because what makes them such is the union of a man and woman. In the second creation account (Genesis 2:18–25) the point is made that the woman and man are suitable companions for one another. Significantly, sexual union should take place in marriage, because it joins the two into 'one flesh'. This is why in 1 Corinthians, Paul is so opposed to extra-marital sex with prostitutes: it leads in some sense to becoming 'one flesh' with the prostitute (1 Corinthians 6:16).

Throughout the Old Testament there is never any question that marriage can be between two men or two women, although there are plenty of examples of marriages which do not conform to the one man–one woman pattern (usually with very negative consequences; it is not possible to draw the conclusion that the Bible is actually recommending, for example, polygamy or concubinage). In the New Testament it is clear from the gospels that Jesus endorsed the understanding that marriage is an expression of God's creation of human beings as male and female (Matthew 19:3–12, Mark 10:2–12). This is why the church has taken the Genesis creation stories to be especially normative.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, a parallel is drawn between marriage and the union between Christ and the church. The differentiation between husband and wife is therefore essential: Jesus and his church are genuinely distinct from one another, yet utterly 'made for each other', and truly joined and united, just as a woman and a man are genuinely different and yet truly united in marriage. Indeed, it is their very physical differences which enable them to be united as 'one flesh'. It is for this reason that, whatever the excellent qualities of many same-sex relationships, and whatever the rights of providing such relationships with legal protection and support, they cannot be described as marriage, because sexual differentiation is inherent to its definition, biblically speaking.