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Same-sex marriage

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disability issues, whether personally or professionally—but not to attend meetings you will be pleased to hear! If you know of anyone who might welcome this opportunity for service in this way, do let us know, but do ask them first!

... and do pray for the members of the Disability Justice Group, that we may know God's wisdom as we seek to explore ways of pursuing our purpose.

And so the story continues...

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Same-sex marriage: responses

Does gender matter?

Thank you for biting the bullet over same-sex marriage in the July *bmj*. I hope any responses you get are thoughtful and kind!

Two aspects stood out for me. The first was Phil Jump's recognition that the legislation on same-sex marriage was a 'monumental change' to the laws of our land. This often seems to be ignored by those who say it was simply a natural extension of equal legal rights to all. Marriage—at least in the traditional sense of the word—is far more than a legal contract. It has always been understood and defined in dictionaries, Registrar's offices, Prayer Books, literature *etc*—quite apart from the Bible—as the union of a man and a woman. In justifying same-sex marriage Keith refers to St Augustine. He would have taken it for granted that he was talking about the union of a man and a woman, of course. In British law, that definition has now been changed. Other past 'redefinitions' of marriage (criminalising of polygamy *etc*) have not been nearly as profound.

The second aspect was Keith's reference to the complementarity of the marriage relationship—'there is a complementarity that can only be found across genders...but there are other kinds that move beyond our traditional understanding of humanity as a "two-sex species"'. There are all sorts of ways in which people complement one another in their relationships, but the idea that the two sexes are simply a 'traditional understanding' of humanity (or any other species come to that) strikes me as very odd. There is a tiny number of people whose gender may be uncertain, but the division between male and female is fundamental to the whole natural world. It is built into our language, and everyone one of us depends on it for our existence. Marriage has, until now, always been an expression of that unique complementarity.

Homosexual people have suffered shameful discrimination, and deserve the same right as anyone else to enter a loving, committed relationship, and to have that relationship recognized and honoured by others. Now in law they can call such a relationship marriage. I am not particularly concerned about the legal use of the term—the significance of marriage is understood in many different ways these days. But to maintain that gender is an immaterial or a marginal factor in human relationships, and especially committed sexual relationships, is absurd.

For me, the consequence is that I would not be able to conduct a same-sex marriage service in church, although I would hope to find ways of affirming and seeking God's blessing on gay and lesbian people, including those in committed relationships.

May the *bmj* long continue to stimulate our thinking as Baptist ministers, and enable us to share views on important issues like this.

Peter Shepherd, minister, Stoneygate Baptist Church Leicester.

WWJD?

Having read July's journal and recently attended a LBA consultation on same-sex marriage (SSM) I noticed a repeated refrain—What Would Jesus Do? As Baptists we believe that Christ is the head of the church and therefore seek to discern the mind of Christ as revealed in the scriptures.

This is an interesting question since, it is often claimed, Jesus didn't say anything about homosexuality. In this short article I'd like to challenge that assumption. If we want to know what Jesus thought about marriage then look at Matthew 19:

3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" 4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' ? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

11 Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have

been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

So what does Jesus have to say about marriage here then?

1. Jesus defined marriage as being between a man and a woman. In vv 4 and 5. Jesus thought that marriage was a creation ordinance, given by God, between men and women. Of course it is legitimate to ask questions about how these words apply to us today, but if we are really concerned with what Jesus thinks then we must start with what he actually said about marriage. And here it is: Jesus defines marriage as being between a man and a woman.

2. Jesus saw all sexual intercourse outside heterosexual marriage as immoral. We see that by his use of the word *porneia* in v 9. Translated in the NIV as ‘sexual immorality’ it is the famous exceptive clause in Matthew 19 to do with grounds for divorce. Jesus may have been discussing divorce here but it is interesting for our definition of marriage that he uses this word here. It literally means ‘illicit sex’ and while different people in the 1st century would place their boundaries slightly differently we know what was meant—any sex outside heterosexual marriage. If you asked a Jew in Jesus’ day if homosexual practice was ‘illicit sex’ they would not hesitate in replying, ‘Yes!’

3. Jesus said that those who could not accept his teaching should not marry. The disciples are taken aback by how serious Jesus is, and respond by wondering if singleness is better. Jesus does not agree, but he does agree that some people should not get married—he outlines ‘eunuchs’ for whom it is ‘better not to marry’.

A lot of ink has been spilt over the different ‘types’ of eunuchs to which Jesus refers in v 12. More recently, some commentators have wondered if ‘eunuchs who were born that way’ might include those with homosexual orientation. Even among the scientific community the interplay between nurture and nature in sexual orientation is hotly contested and so it is unwise to read too much into Jesus’ words. Nonetheless the main thing to notice is the advice that those who cannot accept Jesus’ teaching on heterosexual marriage should not marry. That seems to be directly relevant to the question of SSM. Jesus says, ‘No!’

I’m sure some will disagree with my reading of Matthew 19, but I hope they will at least engage with the text. There are legitimate questions about how we move from the text to 21st century Britain but the text must be where we begin. When I hear people talking about what Jesus thinks about SSM I mostly hear arguments based on what Jesus said about other issues and then seeking to apply principles from those passages to marriage. Why don’t we start with what he actually said about marriage?

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