

---

## GAY MARRIAGE: HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND?

---

### Introduction

The subject of the church's response to the possibility that gay marriage will become legally permissible raises questions not only about the nature of marriage but also about the nature of the task of the church in the world and of the relationship of the church to 'the state'.

While evangelical Christians (that is, those who believe, amongst other things, in the authority of Scripture) will be agreed that marriage, as God has ordained it, is exclusively heterosexual, disagreements surface over the nature of the church's calling in the world and especially over the subject of the relationship of the church to the state. These differences exist amongst member churches of *Affinity*.

Some, for example, hold to the 'establishment principle'<sup>1</sup>, while others do not. Since this issue of *Table Talk* addresses the question of the church's response to the possibility of gay marriage becoming legally permissible, it must inevitably consider the question of the church's relationship to the state. It is not, therefore, an '*Affinity* view' of this subject but one person's understanding of the biblical teaching.

Given the differences that have existed and that still exist today over this issue, a small paper such as this can no more resolve those differences than it could resolve the differences over the subjects and mode of baptism. My purpose is more modest: it is, on the basis of some scriptural principles which I shall seek to articulate, to present a particular view of the calling of the church, a view which I shall then seek to illustrate from certain periods of church history.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Free Church of Scotland holds this. The great Thomas Chalmers made it very plain at the time of the Disruption that those who were leaving the Church of Scotland were going out on the establishment principle, a principle which, they believed, was being vitiated in the established Church of Scotland at that time by the kind of patronage that was being exercised by the Moderates. For a helpful exposition of the establishment principle, as well as of the different ways in which it may be held, see James Bannerman *The Church of Christ Vol. 1* pp. 94-185 and *Vol. 2* pp. 345-349, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh 1960.

But I must first clarify a number of things.

First, I need to stress that this paper deals with the relationship of *the church, qua church*, to the powers that be, not with the relationship of the individual Christian citizen to the state. Individual Christian citizens of this country may well lobby and petition the government on a range of matters and may join with others, Christians or not, in representing their concerns to the government.

Secondly, where churches or groupings of churches are approached by the government of the day to state their views on a particular matter, it goes without saying that it is simple courtesy and common sense for churches to respond to such a request. Nothing that I say in this paper should be understood to be a denial of these two points.

Thirdly, in so far as a church is an organisation that may be legally recognised by the state<sup>2</sup> (whether this be so, of course, will vary from country to country and also may vary within the same country across the centuries), it *may*, as any other organisation recognised by the state, make representations to the powers that be about matters which concern itself or about matters with respect to life within a society concerning which other organisations may equally make representations to the legislature or its individual members or to the government. (I say 'may', rather than 'must'. The distinction is important but constraints of space do not allow me to develop this point<sup>3</sup>.)

It may prove helpful at this point to paint in some of the recent background to the present situation.

---

<sup>2</sup> I do not mean that the church is an organisation like any other organisation; the church is a spiritual entity. But since a church is comprised of people and, as is clear from the New Testament, has a certain structure, then it inevitably is an organisation, as well as being an organism. And since it exists in the world, it may, as such, be legally recognised and have certain legal responsibilities as well as legal privileges. Thus, churches are legally recognised as charities and have the same tax benefits as other charities which receive gifts which are 'gift aided'. Similarly, if a church has premises, it has certain legal responsibilities as a property owner, and if, for example, it serves food on those premises at a church lunch, it must, as any other organisation which does the same, comply with food hygiene regulations. These are not examples of Caesar trespassing upon what is God's but, rather, illustrations of the fact that the church cannot be, in a dualist, almost Gnostic sense, completely 'other worldly'. Of course the fact that many churches may conduct marriages on their premises means that such churches may well feel that they should make representations to MPs and to government when changes in the law of marriage are being discussed.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of the distinction may be illustrated from the following type of situation. A Christian in a university may be the captain of the university chess team and also be the president of the university Christian Union. If student organisations within the university are allowed to use certain parts of the university premises, as captain of the chess team the Christian may well feel it right to make representations to the university if he believes that the chess team is being discriminated against by not being allowed to hold events on university premises whereas groups such as the bridge club are allowed. If the Christian Union were to be discriminated against, the Christian *may* feel it right to make representations because of his belief that it is important to ensure that the university act fairly and because it could be perceived to be the beginning of other liberties being taken from the Christian Union. He may, however, feel that there are spiritual issues involved which override such issues of justice and that representation should only be made to heaven in prayer and for the Christian Union simply to hold its meetings elsewhere.

## I Background

On 5 December 2005 *The Civil Partnership Act 2004* (CPA) came into force. In a leading case decided in 2006 and reported in 2007 Sir Mark Potter, President of the Family Division of the High Court, stated the effect of the provisions of this piece of legislation to be as follows:

*'...[they] remove the financial and other legal and economic disadvantages caused by the prohibition on same sex partners marrying, by conferring on those who have entered a civil partnership similar rights, benefits and material advantages to those enjoyed by married couples. They also provide for the breakdown of the civil partnership in much the same way as marriage... However, there are express distinctions observed between the ceremonies and processes of the two institutions. In particular, civil partnership may not be effected on religious premises, or in a religious ceremony and civil partnership is an institution exclusively open to same-sex couples'<sup>4</sup>. The President of the Family Division later observed: 'In so far as legislative intention is relevant to this issue... the intention of the government in introducing the legislation was not to create a "second class" institution, but a parallel and equalising institution designed to redress a perceived inequality of treatment of long term monogamous same-sex relationships, while at the same time, demonstrating support for the long established institution of marriage'<sup>5</sup>.*

On 15 March 2012 the present coalition government opened the Equal Civil Marriage Consultation. Amongst the government's proposals listed in the consultation were the following:

- To enable same-sex couples to have a civil marriage, i.e., only a civil ceremony in a registered office or approved premises (like a hotel)
- To make no changes to religious marriages. No religious organisation will be forced to conduct same-sex religious marriages as a result of these proposals.<sup>6</sup>

Given the expressed intention of the government of the day in introducing the legislation which allowed for the registration of civil partnerships, it is difficult to see how a law which would permit same-sex equal marriages would not fail to undermine marriage as an institution between a man and a woman. When Baroness Scotland introduced the second reading of the Civil Partnership Bill in the House of Lords, she said: *'[The Bill] offers a secular solution to the disadvantages which same-sex couples face in the way they are treated by our laws. The Bill does not undermine or weaken the importance of marriage and we do not propose to open civil partnership to opposite sex-couples. Civil partnership is aimed at same-sex couples who cannot marry. However, it is important for us to be clear that we continue*

---

<sup>4</sup> *Wilkinson v Kitzinger and another* (No 2) [2007] 1 FCR 183 [para 20]

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, [para 50]

<sup>6</sup> [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-civil-marriage/](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-civil-marriage/)

*to support marriage and recognize that it is the surest foundation for opposite couples raising children*<sup>7</sup>.

The reasoning behind this was as follows: by disallowing the name 'marriage' to be given to same-sex civil partnerships and by disallowing those of the opposite sex to register a same-sex civil partnership, the institution of marriage was being supported; by giving to same-sex couples the right to register a civil partnership which, to all intents and purposes, was conferring on the parties to such a partnership the rights and privileges, etc. which belong to a married couple, parliament was removing a perceived inequality suffered by homosexual and lesbian couples and, effectively, putting them on a par with married couples. But *if* this reasoning were sound (and I am not commenting one way or another on this), then it inevitably follows, with remorseless logic, that a law which will allow same-sex marriage will undermine marriage somewhat: for the very thing which CPA did not allow to same-sex couples (that is, the name 'marriage') in order to support marriage, will be given to them if the proposals published in the government's consultation become law. Apart from the fact that same-sex couples will only be able to have a civil ceremony in a registry office or on approved premises, the only difference between the treatment of homosexual and heterosexual couples would be that heterosexual couples would still not be able to register a civil partnership. This might possibly be viewed as a case of positive discrimination in favour of homosexual couples.

The government's consultation was closed on 14 June 2012. By that date a number of Christian groups had made representations to the government and prepared petitions to be signed in favour of retaining the traditional, legal definition of marriage, which is that of one man and one woman for life. Significantly a petition with 500,000 names and which was delivered to 10 Downing Street was signed not only by Christian people but also by people of no professed religious faith and by gay, as well as heterosexual, people<sup>8</sup>. Concern has been expressed as to the consequences and implications of such a change in the law, while some in the Church of England have claimed that it might trigger a constitutional crisis which will change the Church/State relationship which has existed in this country for the best part of 500 years<sup>9</sup>. To bring the matter right up to date, at the time of writing (August 2012) the SNP government in Scotland recently announced plans to introduce gay marriage into Scotland, possibly as early 2015<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Hansard* HL 22 April 2004, Col 388

<sup>8</sup> The petition was prepared and presented to 10 Downing Street by the *Coalition For Marriage* (C4M). See [www.christian.org.uk/news/500000-strong-marriage-petition-handed-to-no-10](http://www.christian.org.uk/news/500000-strong-marriage-petition-handed-to-no-10)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> See [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-18981287](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-18981287) Although part of the United Kingdom, Scotland has its own parliament to which various matters have been devolved.

## II Biblical Passages

1 Timothy 2:1-7 is clearly a crucial passage. Paul is giving Timothy instructions as to how life is to be ordered within the church: 3:14-15. Therefore, although this letter is addressed personally to Timothy, it is not simply a personal letter but a letter to tell him how to order the affairs and life of the church at Ephesus. While it is written *to* Timothy, it is, of course, written *for* our benefit. As Paul will tell Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16-17, the Scripture is *sufficient* to make the man of God complete.

In some respects the world in which Paul and Timothy ministered bore similarities to our own: throughout the Roman Empire there was undoubtedly a range of beliefs about God or gods and about the life which one should live. It would not be overstating matters to say that a kind of pluralism existed. Indeed, we know that in Athens Paul was confronted with a bewildering variety of idols, while Ephesus (where Timothy was based when Paul wrote his first letter to him [1 Tim. 1:3]) was the centre of the cult of Artemis (Acts 19:23-36). It is highly instructive, therefore, to note carefully not only what Paul says that the people were to pray for but also what he does *not* say.

The passage emphasises both the *inclusivism* of the gospel and its *exclusivism*. The inclusivism is to be seen in the fact that prayer is to be made for all people (v.1: which, in the context must mean all *types* of people, all people without distinction, not without exception, since nobody can pray for every single person). Paul then specifies that, in particular, prayers are to be offered for rulers, that God's people may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. He goes on to say that this is good and pleases God because he will have all people to be saved. (This I understand to be a reference to the decreed will of God rather than to his preceptive will or his 'bare' will of desire, since the 'all people' of v. 4 must surely be the same as the 'all people' of v.1: that is, all without distinction, not all without exception.) But people need to hear the good news if they are to be saved, and this is what v.7 is all about: the gospel is to be heralded and taught. This is more easily done where God's people can live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness than where they live under severe restrictions. While God may use persecution to purge and purify his church, the people of God are not to seek or court it, still less to pray for it. Here is the great inclusivism of the gospel.

The exclusivism is to be seen in the emphasis in v.5 that there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. (Again, the 'all people' must be coterminous with the 'all people' of v.1, and the all people of v.6, and thus denotes all people without distinction, not all people without exception. I understand the reference, therefore, to be to the elect whom he died to save.) If people do not hear of him, they will not be saved. The testimony has to be given.

What Paul does not say that Timothy and the church are to pray for is that the church should be granted special favoured status. He does not say that prayer should be offered for

rulers that they might seek to root out idolatry or that they might enforce Christian teaching upon society. More surprisingly he does not even say that they are to pray that the rulers will apply God's moral law to society. What he is calling for is *toleration* of Christians and of the Christian way of life. Of course the objection might be raised that in the political and social context of the first century, where the church was a minority group in the mighty Roman Empire, it would simply have been impossible for the powers that be to have outlawed idolatry and to have given special status to the church.

The point may be made that we are in a very different social context. But the reply to this is found in two important theological principles. First, the Scripture is *sufficient*. If we were ever meant to pray that we be given special favoured status, then there would be teaching in the Scripture to this effect; but there is no such teaching. What Paul said to Timothy then is relevant for us now. Secondly, God is the God of the impossible: however unlikely it might have been for Rome in the first century to have given special status to the church, God could have brought this about and have told his people to pray for this. The heart of the king is, after all, in the hand of the Lord and he turns it whichever way he chooses. The silence of Scripture, therefore, is deafening with respect to the church not praying for special favoured status.

The most forceful criticism of the position I have outlined thus far is that which appeals to Romans 13:1-7, where, it is claimed, Paul lays down the duties of those in authority, duties which include punishing the evil and commending the good (vv.3-4). Therefore, at the very least, it may be claimed, rulers live under a God-given mandate to apply to society certain standards of good and are to punish deviations from those standards; good is to be commended and evil is to be punished. Some would argue that it is part of the calling of the church to call upon the powers that be to rule in accordance with God's moral law. While there has been a long and honourable tradition in the Christian Church which has held to both of these positions, it is respectfully submitted that this is to misunderstand what Paul is concerned about in this passage.

First, he is not writing a treatise for rulers on how to govern but telling Christians why they were to obey *the actual powers and authorities which were then in place*. While one may seek to deduce the purpose and ends of government from these verses, the fact remains that their focus is upon God's people recognising and respecting these powers rather than upon rulers being instructed as to their responsibilities. Secondly, given that the Roman authorities tolerated a range of things which Paul condemns in Romans 1 (homosexuality being one of them – it was rife in the Graeco-Roman world<sup>11</sup>), his reference to punishing the

---

<sup>11</sup> On homosexuality in the ancient world see the entry 'Homosexuality' in Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (Eds.) *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* OUP, Oxford, 2003. Although the *concept* of homosexuality was somewhat different from ours (Whereas we define sexual practices in terms of whether someone is homosexual, heterosexual, bi-sexual, or trans-sexual, the ancients appeared to think less in these terms and more in terms of dominance and submission, and the active and passive partner. There was thus a greater flexibility or fluidity in this whole area, one where bi-sexuality was more easily assimilated, precisely because

evil and commending the good must be understood in a *relative* rather than an *absolute* sense; there were good things which were commended and evil things which were punished but that is quite different from saying that *all* the good which can be recognised in the civil realm was commended and *all* the evil in the civil realm which can be recognised was punished. Indeed, it is precisely because Paul says in Romans 1 that homosexual practice is the *result* of God's wrath (God giving people over to the sinful desires of their hearts: vv.26-28), that he is so eager to preach the gospel to the people, for it is only the gospel that can deliver people from the wrath of God and from the power of sin under which they live (3:25; 5:9-10; 6:2-7).

The task of the church in this present age, therefore, can be stated *negatively* by saying that it is not her calling to judge or to adjudicate upon the morals of the people of this world (1 Cor. 5:12). The task of the church with respect to the world in this present age, *positively* stated, is to pray, and to preach the gospel, and to practise the life which the gospel demands. Preaching the gospel inevitably involves preaching God's claims and requirements upon people, that is to say, his law; but his law is preached as part of the totality of the proclamation of the gospel, not as something simply to be applied piecemeal to society. It is the gospel which establishes the law (Rom. 3:31, where, in context, 'this faith' is synonymous with, or part of, the gospel). If the church endlessly makes statements in the public arena about moral issues, she can hardly complain if she is perceived by the world to be nothing other than a moralising and moralistic agency, rather than a community of people who have been transformed by the good news and who are charged with the task of proclaiming the good news to a needy world.

The objection may be made at this point that I am advocating a position of maintaining an indifference to the state of society around us, an indifference which ignores the doctrine of God's common grace, an indifference which has affinities with the isolationism of early twentieth-century fundamentalism. It may be urged, in response to what I have said thus far, that common grace requires that we engage with society around us, and that this kind of engagement was practised by people like William Wilberforce in his campaign to abolish the slave trade. Love for our neighbour demands that we follow such a course, rather than the one which I have advocated. But this objection is based upon a confusion, upon a failure to make certain necessary distinctions; it also fails to take account of certain historical realities. I shall elaborate and develop both these points.

First, I would stress the importance of the distinction made already between what the individual Christian does as a member of society, where he may make common cause on many moral issues with those who are not evangelical Christians (precisely because people are God's image-bearers and we have social responsibilities as Christian citizens), and what the church is charged to do. Different Christians may find themselves in different spheres of

---

they did not think of sexual behaviour in terms of gender.) this does not alter the fact that homosexual *practice* would have been the same.

service and, according to their calling and circumstances, may take up with different issues. The task of the church must ever be as set out in the Great Commission of Matt. 28:18-20: it is those who have been made disciples and identified with the church of Christ who are to be taught all things which Christ has commanded. The teaching of Christ is not to be given to society at large, for the simple reason that only those who have been born of his Spirit and who have entered his kingdom as his disciples are capable of holding to his teaching.

Certainly we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. But it is surely time to question the way in which these terms have become something of a mantra on the lips of some Christians and as being synonymous with social or political action. When Jesus uttered these words his disciples could hardly have been expected to have effected widespread change in the Jewish or Graeco-Roman society of their day by *social and political action*. Socially and politically they were a marginalised group. Our Lord's words come immediately after the beatitudes and before his great exposition of the law of God. The beatitudes are all to do with spiritual experience and the character which is formed in and by such experience, while the exposition of the law of God further develops our Lord's teaching on the character of those who are in God's kingdom and the conduct to which such character leads. *This* is what it means to be salt on a corrupt earth and light in a dark world. This is a far cry from becoming indistinguishable from a political pressure or lobby group. Individual Christian citizens may well become part of such groups but it is a mistake to think that this is what being salt and light is all about. The simple reason why this cannot be so is that those who are not disciples of Christ may join with them in these groups, contending over moral issues, but this does not mean that such people are salt or light. The unconverted person who makes common cause with the Christian in campaigning against homosexuality or against gay marriage is as much in need of salvation as are those who go through with gay marriage.

This is the kind of thing which some of the Pharisees in our Lord's day failed to grasp; one fears that some evangelicals today may be failing to see this. The fundamental problem with a gay person is not that he or she is gay; the fundamental problem is that they are estranged from God. *In this sense* their need before God is no different from that of someone guilty of heterosexual adultery, pre-marital sex, or of someone who has outwardly not sinned in a sexual way at all but is still not right with God. This is not to deny that some sins may have physical, psychological, and social consequences (alcoholism is an example), and that to be preserved from such is a good thing. The simple point which I am making is that the teetotaler, while he or she may have a much better quality of life than that of the alcoholic and is likely to be a far more useful and productive member of society than the alcoholic, still needs to be saved. *In that sense* there is no difference between sinners. And since the task of the church is to proclaim the gospel to all and sundry, *at that point* no distinction is made between them (though initial contact with such *may* necessitate different approaches and the pastoral care for the converted alcoholic *may* be far more demanding than for that of the converted teetotaler).



The other distinction to be observed is one to which I have already referred: the church as *an organisation* within society *may* at times make various representations to the government of the day. She does so, however, on a level playing ground with other organisations, not as the people of God invested with spiritual authority. Her spiritual authority is exercised in an entirely different way; this is one reason why, at times, a church may choose *not* to avail itself of the right to make representations, precisely to avoid creating confusion in the minds of others and to safeguard her position as something which is entirely different from every other organisation and as being spiritually unique: ‘The weapons of our warfare...’ ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’

Before turning to historical matters, it needs to be stressed that the church is also to *practise* the life which the gospel requires. I am not, therefore, arguing for the position which has been frequently caricatured in the drawing of a missionary, standing under a palm tree, declaiming the gospel to naked and half starved people, with no concern for them as people but only wanting to see them saved. It is easy to criticise in this way the approach which I am advocating but it is an unfair criticism, based on a caricature, and completely refuted by many examples of those who, while holding to the position I am advocating, did untold good for their fellow men and women in the physical and social realm<sup>12</sup>.

I turn now to the historical realities which need to be considered.

### **III Historical Considerations**

When the engagement of Christians (not to mention the church) with moral and social issues is considered, it is not unknown for evangelicals to assume that there are, basically, only two approaches which have been adopted historically. The first is that of the withdrawal and isolationism which characterised American fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. This is rightly criticised as having shown failure to love one’s neighbour, as expressing an inadequate or non-existent view of God’s common grace and a distorted – almost a dualist – view of creation, and as being partly the result of a dispensational mode of reading the Scriptures.

The only other approach is that which was demonstrated by William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect in their concern to deal with some of the evils of society, the most notable being the abolition of the slave trade. Social and even political involvement *of the church* is then seen to be essentially the same thing as that which Wilberforce and others engaged in. Indeed the two positions are sometimes represented as two opposite poles: as a result of over-reaction to the social gospel of the early twentieth century evangelicals retreated into their ghettos and this is sometimes called ‘the great reversal’ (that is, a reversal from the

---

<sup>12</sup> One need look no further than C.H. Spurgeon, whose great work was that of preaching and pastoring but who set up an orphanage. George Whitefield was also involved in such a task, while Wesley was concerned about the whole person, not simply the soul.

involvement which Wilberforce and others demonstrated)<sup>13</sup>. This approach has, in turn, been called ‘the great betrayal’ and has been criticised as failing to protect the primacy of the gospel, and for demonstrating a failure to draw some fairly important distinctions and revealing a failure to read aright the historical context in which Wilberforce laboured<sup>14</sup>. I shall seek to demonstrate that it is also based on a somewhat selective and distorted reading of church history, a reading which ignores some fairly important periods. I shall deal with three different events from the history of the church before seeking to demonstrate that campaigning against gay marriage today is not really doing the same sort of thing which Wilberforce did in his day.

### **1. Augustine and *The City of God***

Augustine’s *magnum opus* was written between the years AD 412 and 427. It was begun, therefore, two years after the sacking of Rome in AD 410. Although *The City of God* was not written simply as a response to this event, the very early part of the book needs to be understood against this background and the entire book needs to be seen as partly a critique of the positive way in which the Roman Empire had come to be viewed by Christians since the time of the Dominate of Constantine. The great Bible scholar and commentator Jerome was representative of many in viewing the fall of Rome as nothing other than calamitous. He wrote in one letter, ‘The whole world is sinking in ruin’<sup>15</sup>, while to another correspondent he wrote, ‘If Rome perishes, how shall we look for help?’<sup>16</sup> This view of the help which Rome gave to the cause and church of Jesus Christ was one which had been fostered from the time of the church historian Eusebius, especially as a result of the legal recognition which Constantine had given to, and the benefits which he had conferred upon, the Christian Church. Coming, as this did, after the terrible persecution in the time of his predecessor Diocletian (not to mention the sufferings endured by the church under earlier emperors, such as Domitian), one can understand Eusebius’s positive view of Rome and the alarm which Jerome felt. In other words, Jerome and many Christians of that time had come to view the well being of Rome as essential to the well being of the cause of Christ. The sack of Rome meant that their civilisation and culture were collapsing and, they feared, the cause of Christ with it.

---

<sup>13</sup> See John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Marshall Morgan & Scott, Basingstoke, 1984, pp. 1-10.

<sup>14</sup> See the thoughtful and penetrating critique made by Melvin Tinker, *Reversal of Betrayal? Evangelicals and Socio-Political Involvement in the Twentieth Century* in *Churchman* 113/3 1999. The article is available at [www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman\\_113\\_3\\_Tinker.pdf](http://www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_113_3_Tinker.pdf) The substance of the article formed the 1999 Evangelical Library Lecture.

<sup>15</sup> Cited by Michael A. G. Haykin “*The Most Glorious City of God*”: Augustine of Hippo And ‘*The City of God*’ in ‘The Power of God in the Life of Man: Papers Read at the 2005 Westminster Conference’ p.39. The source is Letter 128.5. The Latin is to be found in I. Hilberg, ed., *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymii Epistulae. III: Epistulae CXXI-CLIV (Corpus Christorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 56/1; 2nd ed; Vienna: Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 161*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Original source, op. cit., 94

Augustine, however, brought a more biblically-informed mind to bear upon the issue than did Jerome and, in effect, made it quite clear that the success of the city of God does not depend upon patronage from the city of man. There is, surely, a parallel with our own situation. The Christian church and the Christian faith has certainly had favourable treatment from the state in this country for a very long period of time. Without being alarmist some believe that there are indications that this has already begun to change and that things could well be different for us in the future. This may be so. But we need to remember that *toleration* of the church and protection of freedom of expression for Christians and the church is quite different from having special favoured status. If a law does allow for gay marriage to take place, while we may well lament such a fact, there is surely a difference between a law which *permits* such marriages and one which would *compel* Christians to contract such a marriage or which would compel Christian ministers to conduct such a marriage.

Of course, it may be argued that this is the thin end of a wedge and that the time may well arrive when churches will be penalised if they refuse to conduct a gay marriage ceremony. Since, however, there is absolutely nothing in the New Testament about Christian ministers conducting weddings nor about weddings taking place on 'church premises', would it not be the essence of wisdom for churches to make a decision, before such a day would arrive, that they would not conduct *any* wedding ceremonies? In this way gay couples would not be discriminated against by the churches and ministers would not be unnecessarily making martyrs of themselves. To suffer for refusing to conduct a gay wedding would hardly be suffering for the cause of Christ, since Jesus Christ has not commanded or required his servants to conduct weddings. (Of course, this still leaves the question of the place of a Christian registrar to be considered, but this is *not* the subject of this paper, which is concerned *only* with the response of the church.)

Lest we think this to be very strange, we need to bear in mind that it is *impossible* for Christians or anyone else in France to be married by a minister or on 'church premises', and this is the result of the separation of church and state in that land. In this connection it is also worth remembering that the judgment in the leading case in the nineteenth century which defined the modern law of marriage (one man and one woman for life) was based on a concept of 'Christendom'<sup>17</sup>. What one believes about the concept of Christendom will

---

<sup>17</sup> *Hyde v. Hyde and Woodmansee* (1866) L.R. 1 P.& D. 130. Although this case is a leading case in the legal definition of marriage, it is, perhaps, somewhat disingenuous for Christians to appeal to this definition without remainder. Although divorce was possible in England and Wales when this case was decided, the modern law allows divorce in many types of situation where this was not possible in 1866 and there are far, far more divorces than then. As long ago as 1997 this led two leading family law academics to write: '...the increasing availability of divorce – particularly after the Second World War – made that definition inaccurate: marriage was indeed still a voluntary union, but it could no longer be regarded as lifelong': S.M. Cretney and J.M. Masson *Principles of Family Law* Sweet & Maxwell, London, 1997, pp. 2-3. Furthermore, the *Hyde* case decided that a marriage contracted in a country where polygamy was recognised could not be recognised in this country (and thus a divorce could not be granted in this country because there was no legally recognisable marriage to be dissolved) *even if the marriage itself was not polygamous*. This clearly is no longer the law in

inevitably have implications for the way in which one views the church's response to the possibility of gay marriage.

### **1662 and the Act of Uniformity**

This year marks the 350th anniversary of the Great Ejection. There is good historical evidence to support the view that some of the requirements of the Act of Uniformity were part of a deliberate policy to make it impossible for the Puritans to subscribe to the Act. The question needs to be answered as to how it was possible for such a situation to arise after the gains which had been made by the Puritans in the 1640s, and how the restoration of the monarchy (which was part of the process which led to the Act of Uniformity being passed) could have taken place a mere eleven years after the execution of Charles I. Before considering that question, it should be pointed out that this demonstrates that a week is indeed a long time in politics, and changes in the political realm can have considerable consequences for the people of God. While there were a number of factors involved in the Restoration, not the least being the part played by the Presbyterians (who were subsequently shown to have been outmanoeuvred, not to say deceived), it cannot be denied that much of the populace had grown weary of the 'Christian' legislation introduced during the Commonwealth period and, furthermore, that the passing of the Act of Uniformity was, in part, an exercise in settling old scores.

The lessons for us should be obvious. It is impossible for parliament to enact legislation which is very much out of step with public opinion and out of sympathy with the public mood (the repeal of the 'poll tax' during Mrs Thatcher's Premiership being a good illustration of this); similarly, if public opinion and public pressure reaches a certain point, it may prove impossible for parliament *not* to enact certain legislation. And public opinion and the public mood cannot be gauged simply by counting the numbers of people who sign a petition. It is far more complex than that<sup>18</sup>. In this connection we should note that through Moses the Lord tolerated and regulated certain practices for Israel which were far from ideal. Polygamy, for example, was regulated, as is abundantly clear from Deut. 21:15-17. This, presumably, was, as with the divorces tolerated during that period, 'because of the hardness of your hearts' (Matt. 19:8). It is surely significant that the Lord tolerated this even amongst the covenant people, when the divine ideal is clearly that which is found in Genesis 2:24 and which was re-affirmed by Jesus in Matt. 19:4-5. (The statement put out by one Christian body that marriage has always been between one man and one woman and that this has always been the majority position is, therefore, somewhat ambiguous and misleading. In so far as this defines the divine ideal, it is certainly correct. As a statement of what has always prevailed, it is manifestly false. The Old Testament gives the lie to such a

---

this country. In other words the definition laid down in 1866 and the reasoning behind it has been significantly eroded, even though the case was cited as recently as 2006 by Sir Mark Potter as laying down the common law definition of marriage: see paragraph [11] of *Wilkinson v. Kitzinger and another (No 2)*.

<sup>18</sup> Signatures on a petition only tell you the views of those who have signed, not of those who have not signed.

statement, as does the fact that there are many Muslims in the world who have more than one wife. Furthermore, it may be worth pondering the fact that none of us has a marriage which conforms to the original ideal; before sin entered, death was not known by man, and therefore marriage could not have been until death, because there was no death. This is almost certainly the reason for the fact that whereas the priests were forbidden to marry prostitutes or divorcees [Lev. 21:7], the high priest was also forbidden to marry a widow [Lev. 21:13-14].) I am not suggesting that this is an argument for allowing gay marriage; I am simply pointing out that legislators have to take account of public opinion.

One of the lessons for us may well be this: if Christians give others good cause to believe that we are simply 'anti gay', then should gay marriage be enacted the 'gay lobby' may well seek to settle old scores with the people of God. In this way concerns that anti gay marriage may be the thin end of a very thick wedge may actually play their part in making these concerns a self-fulfilling prophecy. The danger of us representing ourselves as an 'anti' group may be illustrated from another historical phenomenon.

### **The Temperance Movement**

I take the view that the Bible does not condemn the drinking of wine (and therefore of alcohol) as evil *per se*, though it does warn of the dangers of wine and strong drink, and condemns drunkenness. It is, therefore, a thing indifferent whether one chooses to drink wine and is a matter of conscience. By contrast the Scripture clearly condemns homosexual activity. To that extent there is a difference between opposing gay marriage and supporting the temperance movement. This having been said, there were those in my home country of Wales who, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, supported the temperance movement because of the very great domestic and social evils which resulted from the heavy drinking which was rife in the South Wales industrial valleys and in the seaboard towns of South Wales. The movement found support amongst those who were evangelicals as well as amongst those who were not. The problem arose, however, that Christianity came to be associated in the minds of many, both within the 'chapels' and amongst those outside, with teetotalism. Christianity came to be perceived as something which was essentially 'anti' enjoyment. Seth Joshua, who was to become a leading evangelist with what was known as 'the Forward Movement', a vibrant evangelistic agency within the Presbyterian Church of Wales, and himself a strong teetotaler, experienced this kind of thing first hand. He 'signed the pledge' but had nothing in its place and became thoroughly miserable. It was only later, when he came to faith in Christ, that he found the springs of joy that only Christ can give. 'Signing the pledge' did not do it for him<sup>19</sup>.

There is surely a lesson for us here. To call upon someone who is homosexual to turn from such a lifestyle, when this is something by which they define themselves, without having anything to replace the emptiness which they will inevitably experience, is no better than

---

<sup>19</sup> Geraint Fielder, *Grace, Grit & Gumption*, Christian Focus/Evangelical Movement of Wales (2000), pp. 30-32

asking a regular partygoer to sign the pledge. But if the church is seen to be simply campaigning on moral issues, this is precisely the kind of situation that may be created. If all the gay person hears is a message that says that their lifestyle is wrong, then they are not hearing the good news: for the good news is surely that God in Christ becomes the centre of our being and empowers the sinner to live a new life. It is, perhaps, significant that in the 1920s and 1930s, when the temperance movement was very strong in South Wales and linked with 'the chapels', the late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, himself a teetotaler<sup>20</sup>, saw many converted from lives of hopeless and helpless drunkenness but was opposed to the churches being identified with the temperance movement, precisely because that was not the gospel<sup>21</sup>. Towards the end of his life he was saying exactly the same kind of thing with respect to homosexuality. He was in no doubt as to the moral category in which homosexuality is to be placed. 'The practising of homosexuality is sin, in exactly the same way as any other sin is sin'<sup>22</sup>. However, he later went on to say in the same discussions that if orthodox Christians appeared simply to defend a moralistic position they would not get a hearing. There had to be concern and compassion for people. 'We have been too guilty of moralism instead of being more like our Lord.'<sup>23</sup>

### **Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect**

The memory of this wonderful man of God should always be held in high honour for his great work in the abolition of the slave trade. Before we think, however, that what he did can simply be duplicated today, we need to consider the following. First, Wilberforce was a very wealthy man and was an MP at a time before every adult in this country had the franchise and at a time when parliament was filled with the aristocracy and wealthy industrialists. Parliament was undoubtedly more influential and powerful then than it is today: witness the way in which government ministers in recent years leak proposals to the press before they present them to parliament. The existence of a mass media which pays little deference to parliament means that our social context is vastly different from that of Wilberforce. Secondly, one cannot ignore the fact that the great evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century was to have profound moral and social implications which reached on into the nineteenth century. We, by contrast, are living at a time when the influence of the Christian gospel upon national institutions and upon the way of life in these islands has been on the wane. This is not to adopt a defeatist, pessimistic attitude; it is simply to acknowledge the huge difference in our historical context from that of Wilberforce. Indeed, as the nineteenth century wore on, the rise of the 'nonconformist conscience' was

---

<sup>20</sup> Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years 1899-1939*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh 1982, p. 95

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96, 197

<sup>22</sup> Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith 1939-1981*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 716

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

something which politicians could not ignore. In the third place Wilberforce's context was one in which rights were beginning to be increasingly emphasised. What Wilberforce and others did was to demonstrate that the slaves were human and should have similar rights to others. The developments associated with Lord Shaftesbury later in the nineteenth century were part of the same concern with respect to children and people working in the factories of the time.

Of course, by campaigning against the slave trade Wilberforce and others were inevitably alienating those who had vested interests in the trade and who saw this as an attack, amongst other things, upon their property rights. By contrast, many perceive a campaign against gay marriage (albeit that it is expressed positively as a campaign *for* marriage) to be simply a campaign *against* the 'right' of gay people to have the same privileges as heterosexual people. The campaign is not seeking to liberate any oppressed group, for (if we leave aside those who work as registrars whose conscience would not allow them to conduct such a ceremony) nobody is being compelled to do something against their convictions: rather, toleration is being given to a certain group to do something which they desire to do. Of course the issue is more complex than this because marriage confers a *status*, a legally recognisable status and this, surely, raises for those members of society who cannot accept gay marriage the dilemma of their freedom of thought and freedom of speech: will they be compelled to recognise such a marriage? This point notwithstanding (which would require another paper as long as this one to deal with adequately), the fact remains that Wilberforce was seeking to extend liberties to an oppressed group, whereas a campaign against marriage is seeking to stop a certain group having certain legal rights. The two situations are entirely different.

#### **IV Pastoral Considerations**

Before drawing to a conclusion, I wish to address a matter which, though it may have been considered by others, I have not seen addressed elsewhere. It is this: there may well be people who are not attracted to the opposite sex and who have no desire for an erotic or sexual relationship with someone of the same sex but who would find the loneliness of living on their own something difficult to bear. At present many in *the world* recognise the following as valid: heterosexuality, homosexuality, bi-sexuality, and trans-sexuality. Evangelicals regard only heterosexuality as valid and the practice of such sexual relations is acceptable only within monogamous marriage. But might we not need to consider another phenomenon? Jesus spoke of those who are born eunuchs, those who are made eunuchs by others, and those who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:11-12). Since Jesus was not, as Origen mistakenly thought (and practised what he preached!), advocating castration for the kingdom of heaven, the making oneself a eunuch must refer to the forgoing of marriage. This being so, those who are born eunuchs must refer to those who, for whatever reason (physical or psychological), are incapable of marriage. Since everyone when born is in such a state, Jesus must be referring to those who

have something in their constitutional make-up which means that, when they come to marriageable age they are unable to marry. But there is no suggestion that these are homosexual. There was a time in this country when two bachelors or two spinsters might live together without there being any suggestion that they were homosexual. Should not the church of Jesus Christ acknowledge that though marriage is the norm, the single state has an honourable place in Scripture and that it is perfectly possible for two or more single people of the same sex to live together *without* there being anything of a homosexual nature in the relationship?

## **Conclusion**

The church of Jesus Christ has sometimes thrived under persecution. This is not, however, a reason to desire persecution. 1 Timothy 2 encourages us to pray for toleration. While we are deeply grateful for our heritage and for the great influence of the Christian faith upon our national institutions, the loss of some of that heritage does not mean that the Christian faith cannot flourish or that the Christian church cannot function. In many parts of the world she has had to function in such circumstances. We must take our cue from the Scriptures, not from tradition or from what we have had in the past. Indeed, it may be worth reminding ourselves that from 1662 until well on into the nineteenth century nonconformists in this country suffered considerable discrimination. This is not a nonconformist making a typically anti-Anglican jibe; Christians should be above such things. But we may have short memories and forget the following: the effects of the Test and Corporation Acts of Charles II (a very long and unhappy legacy of the Restoration 'backlash') were such that nonconformists could not sit in parliament until these Acts were repealed in 1828; it was not until 1854 and 1856 that the nonconformist 'heirs of the Puritans' could be admitted to Oxford University and Cambridge University, though they continued to suffer discrimination in various ways until the Universities Test Act became law in 1871. When some Anglican clerics protest that a law allowing homosexual marriage would break the relationship between church and state which has existed in this country for some 500 years, they ought to ponder the fact that that association meant that for a considerable part of that period Christians who conscientiously could not agree with the *via Anglicana* suffered considerably! Yet one would have to say that nonconformity was in a far healthier spiritual state from the earlier part of the nineteenth century up until about 1870 than it is in today.

While we should learn lessons from the past, we may also learn from what is happening in other parts of the world in our own day. Australia, for example, has removed all prohibited degrees of affinity (as distinct from degrees of consanguinity) as a restriction to marriage<sup>24</sup>. This would appear to be a significant departure not only from the biblical teaching of marriage but also from that which God has made part of the moral law which applies to all

---

<sup>24</sup> Cretney and Masson, op. cit. p. 45



people<sup>25</sup>. Yet parts of Australia have seen significant spiritual blessing amongst evangelicals, not least in the Diocese of Sydney, which is an evangelical diocese. The point I am making is this: however much one may lament the erosion of our Christian heritage, and the legal recognition and toleration within our society of practices which are contrary to God's law (a law which may be known and approved even by those without the special revelation of Scripture), it may nevertheless be possible for the church to function in such a society and to see significant blessing. Indeed, it is in this way, the way of more and more people being converted, with the impact this may have even upon those who are not themselves converted, that society is most likely to be influenced and the present trend to discard our Christian heritage to be reversed.

As for those who say that the church is to confront the state with the law of God because righteousness exalts a nation and righteousness is to be found by obeying God's law, I make a two-fold reply. First, the law God gave to Israel tolerated many things which were far from ideal (polygamy being one of them). Secondly, the possession of the best laws by Israel did not guarantee their obedience to those laws. Indeed, Romans 7 tells us that God's law may well stir up sin. It is the gospel which establishes the law, not the other way around (Rom. 3:31).

What I am arguing for is not new. In 1971 the late Dr Lloyd-Jones, in an address to the BEC, had this to say: 'When the church is regarded as a protest movement she has become a travesty of herself. Neither must the church be a branch of the Establishment. The church is not in the world to preserve the status quo... Neither is it the business of the church to improve society... Still less is it the business of the church to indulge in mere denunciation of sins and sinners'<sup>26</sup>. He goes on to speak of the need for compassion for people and of the need for the church to have spiritual power<sup>27</sup>.

At the date of writing (August 2012) it is not known whether the government will implement its proposals to allow for gay marriage. Whether it does or does not should make no difference to the standing orders Christ has given to his church as found in the Great Commission. We are, like David of old, to serve God in our generation. May we all be given grace to do so!

*Stephen Clark*

---

<sup>25</sup> On this see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1957, pp. 49-55, 250-256. It is not without significance that although homosexuality was practised in Corinth, the sin of the incestuous brother in 1 Corinthians 5 (sleeping with his step-mother) is regarded by Paul as sinking to a level that was lower than that to which pagans had fallen. There is a sense, therefore, in which Australia has legitimised such things.

<sup>26</sup> Hywel R. Jones, ed. *Unity In Truth: Addresses given by Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones at meetings held under the auspices of the British Evangelical Council*, Evangelical Press, Darlington, 1991, pp. 139-140

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

*Stephen Clark is minister of Freeschool Court Evangelical Church, Bridgend, and Chair of the Affinity Theological Study Conference and a member of the Affinity Council. He lectures in systematic theology at the London Theological Seminary and on the Evangelical Movement of Wales' Theological Training Course, of which he is Principal and Director.*

**Table Talk** is a series of occasional papers published on line by the Affinity Theological Team. Its purpose is to stimulate theological thinking on significant issues. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Theological Team.

**Foundations** is an online journal published twice a year by the Affinity Theological Team. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, including in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics and indicating their relevance to pastoral ministry.



The Old Bank House, 17 Malpas Road, Newport. NP20 5PA  
Telephone: 01633 893925  
Email: [office@affinity.org.uk](mailto:office@affinity.org.uk)  
Website: [www.affinity.org.uk](http://www.affinity.org.uk)  
Registered Charity No. 258924