

Covenant Fellowship Scotland

Response to the Report of the Theological Forum to the 2017 General Assembly, with particular reference to the Appendix to the Report:

‘An Approach to the Theology of Same-sex Marriage (2017)’

Executive Summary

General Concerns with the Report and its Appendix

- The Theological Forum was not asked by the General Assembly to write this Report, but rather volunteered to do so.
- Certain features of the Report (see fifth bullet-point below) seem to indicate a lack of membership on the Forum from a traditionalist position.
- The Report is controversial and will lead to further division in the Church, with some likely to opt to secede from the Church.
- The Report is being brought forward only 5 years after a comprehensive theology of marriage was embraced unanimously by the General Assembly, yet there appears to be little or no engagement with that earlier Report here.
- There is every appearance of a pro-Revisionist, anti-Traditionalist bias evident in the Report both in the terminology applied to the respective groups, and also in the caricature of the Traditionalists’ view of Scripture presented in the Report [1.6 – 1.11].
- In preparing the Report, the Forum gives no appearance on having ‘consulted’ widely with the Traditionalists within the Church.
- The strong impression given is that the aim of the Report has been to justify same-sex marriage.

Section 1 of the Appendix: The Use of Scripture

- Unfortunately, this section does not actually expound any Scripture. In particular, despite the Forum’s intention of ascertaining a theology of same-sex **marriage**, the Report nowhere seeks to indicate the contribution that Genesis 2:24 (a text that was fundamental for Jesus’ own understanding of marriage [Matt 19:4-6]) makes to our understanding of marriage.

Responding to the Forum’s First Main Argument for Inclusion. Section [1.4]

- Committed and faithful partnerships between equal persons of the same sex **were** in fact known in the ancient world.
- Whenever the Bible speaks of same-sex sexual acts it assesses them negatively, irrespective of any other factors involved.
- When speaking on this (as on other topics), the biblical authors wrote under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit of God, which is what gives their word authority.

Responding to the Forum’s Second Main Argument for Inclusion. Section [1.5]

- While there is, as the Report indicates, ‘a distinction between the written text of Scripture and the living Word of God (Jesus Christ),’ Jesus cannot be understood apart from the written word of Scripture.
- The Reformed churches have always held that the final authority for all our decision-making must be Scripture and not, as the Report suggests, our consciences.
- The Report does not broach the vast theological problem implicit in the Forum’s argument - that Jesus now contradicts what he once said in the flesh.

Section 2 of the Appendix – General Comment

- The Report depends heavily on one recent work of one scholar, Professor Song of Durham University, but offers no rationale for choosing this work from a host of others, written from a variety of perspectives and theological positions.

Sections 2.2 (A) and 2.3 (B)

- Section 2.2 (A) on ‘Human rights arguments’ recognizes some of the weaknesses of these arguments, and, while nothing is said about this in the Report, Professor Song’s work is also critical of such an approach. He, in fact, deliberately avoids it.
- Section 2.3 (B) on ‘Analogical Arguments,’ which seeks to show that marriage has taken many forms throughout the centuries, is not in fact able to identify any period or society where marriage was entered into by same-sex couples.

Section 2.4 (C): Theological arguments with particular reference to the work of Professor Robert Song

- It seems rather strange that such a high profile be given to Professor Song's work for two reasons: (i) he avoids most of the arguments normally used by the Revisionists, including the Human Rights Arguments [section 2.3]; and (ii) what he argues for is specifically **not** same-sex marriage, but something significantly different, covenant partnership. How can the Forum use a book that champions covenant partnership to back a proposal for same-sex **marriage**?
- It seems highly unusual to base a large part of one's theological argument on such a new piece of work (2014), particularly when the Forum is proposing a position that casts aside the church's traditional doctrine and practice with regard to marriage that has lasted for 500 years.

Comments on Specific Sections of the Report

2.4.5 Song is correct in recognising that with the coming of Jesus some Christians are called to, and gifted with, the new vocation of celibacy (Lk 20:35; 1 Cor 7:7). He argues that, as a result, procreation is now 'theologically redundant' for Christians.

- But is marriage not still advocated by Jesus and Paul as a valid vocation? And, is not the Abrahamic promise (Gen 12:2), which itself was a re-affirmation of the creation blessing (Gen 1:28), still for us and our children ... (Acts 2:39)?

2.4.6 – 2.4.11 The argument of Song's book is required to navigate the Report's logic here, hence the additional paper on our web-site showing this. With celibacy as a new vocation, Song wonders if other new vocations might also be possible. He suggests 'non-procreative' covenant partnership as a third vocation alongside marriage and celibacy.

- If this third vocation did in fact exist in the early church would there not be some evidence of it in the NT? Yet, Song himself admits that the NT 'never envisages any possibility of' this third vocation.

Song then goes on to speculate as to whether these covenant partnerships can include sexually active same-sex partners and argues that they can.

- The problem with this is that nowhere in the Bible do we find examples of sexually active covenant partnerships outside of marriage, evidence which Song himself accepts.

At this point the Forum, following Song, makes the move from the 'surface meaning of texts' to the 'deeper structure of the biblical story,' and argues that just as, over the centuries, the Church has changed its attitudes to slavery, the role of women in church and marriage, etc., can our thinking not change regarding sexual relationships as well.

- The problem with each of these examples is that there are texts and passages of Scripture than on a 'surface reading' can be understood as at least pointing in that direction. In the case of same-sex sexual relationships there are no such texts or passages.

2.4.10 Here the Report claims that 'in *creation*, the purpose of male and female was for *pro-creation*. So, within that mind-set, sexual differentiation was for procreation.' With procreation no longer being seen by both Song and the Forum as 'essential for the growth of the Kingdom' the possibility of non-procreative unions is opened up, in particular, same-sex sexually active unions.

- One of the big problems with this is that it doesn't take account of the creation narrative in Genesis 2, where no reference whatsoever is made to the role of procreation. Instead there is a strong emphasis on the creation of a (specifically) woman/ female 'helper' for the man to alleviate his aloneness and to transform a 'not good' situation to a 'good' one (Gen 2:18). Sexual differentiation is from the very beginning requisite for faithfulness within and the permanence of the marriage relationship as the 'man' cleaves to his 'woman' (Genesis 2:24) and they become one flesh.

Conclusion

The Theological Forum has put forward a report which seeks to justify the Church permitting designated ministers and deacons to conduct same-sex 'marriages'. Unfortunately, the Forum has not engaged with the Scriptures, has caricatured the 'Traditionalist' position and has based its core theological case on the work of one scholar whose work does not provide a solid foundation upon which to abandon the orthodox position of the Church, which it holds with the vast majority of Christians worldwide and which is ably expressed in the Church's Confession of Faith: 'Marriage is between one man and one woman'. We therefore urge the General Assembly to reject this report and reaffirm the Church's biblical and historic position.