

Some implications of accepting the 2019 Methodist Conference Report, *God In Love Unites Us*, commending same-sex marriage.

This report has far wider implications than merely a change in Methodist marriage practice. Anyone minded to accept it has to be happy to approve changes which are more serious and fundamental even than marriage, changes which are summarised here.

Marriage

The report abolishes the biblical template of marriage as being the union of a man and a woman.

Family

In so doing it abandons the biblical model of family in which a mother and father have complementary roles in the bearing and upbringing of their offspring.

The Created Order

Once marrying another person of either gender becomes equally valid, males and females are rendered essentially interchangeable at the fundamental level of their gender (*gender is used here colloquially*). As such the entire created order of Genesis, where humanity is created as two distinctly different and radically complementary genders, is abolished. Rendering the two genders interchangeable, alongside transgender developments is a step towards humanity becoming androgynous and ultimately neuter. The reversal of Divine creation is an 'un-making', the jettisoning of an order imposed by God at the Creation, and a step backwards to there being 'No form and void'.

The Bible

The report is a skilled exercise in ultra-liberal, biblical criticism. Driven by its reflections on contemporary trends in society, the report uses generalised biblical principles such as love to validate a case it was always determined upon. Any detailed biblical work is thin, quoted authorities highly selective, and the impression given that only biblical literalists could disagree with it. On the contrary the report projects a skewed view of biblical exegesis.

Change to teaching on both marriage, family, and gender mean that a vast quantity of the bible could be altered, not just the odd verse being airbrushed out.

Perhaps most significant, liberal criticism undermines the authority of the bible. If Methodism goes down this road where will it go next? 2 Timothy 3.16 is no more. The report already purports to know better than St Paul, (4.3.12), will 1 Corinthians 13 be next? (the Greek is not easy!)

Ethics

The report does not simply propose a change of church practice but a change in ethics. The Bible predictably issues dire warnings about sexual sin.

However, the Bible does not view sexual sin as uniquely bad; it is one sin amongst many. The report is not contentious because it deals with a particularly heinous sin, but because it seeks to actually abolish that one sin. In redefining what is 'right and wrong', it would change what does and does not need the forgiveness of the Cross. Methodism is venturing onto dangerous ground. To commend practices deemed sinful by the bible takes us into 'millstones round the neck' territory.

The ethical nature of the proposed change renders a 'mixed economy' with 'op-outs' and 'cross-referrals' invalid. Methodism is a connexional church. It can have only one set of ethics.

Philosophy; towards a secular church.

The report is eager and willing to manipulate the biblical text in support of its own proposals because the philosophy of liberal theology lacks any tangible belief in a supernatural God, indeed in any spiritual domain. Shorn of a supernatural source and a divine imperative, biblical ethics lose their

authority and force; they no longer need to be wrestled with and obeyed. Instead, Methodist ethics will in future to be periodically altered to keep in step with the clamouring demands of a secular opinion which will become ipso facto the church's reference point. The report thus represents a further stage in the church abandoning its supernatural foundations and adopting a secular religious model; the vertical replaced by the horizontal.

Once a church's ethics lose their transcendent origin, and are merely 'the present rules of the club', subject to change by the committee, no-one need feel an obligation to obey.

Pastoral care

Commending same sex marriage as the true alternative to homophobic conservatism, means that the report ignores a 'middle way'. Hard work needs to be started on pastoral apologetics so that the church can welcome people with same-sex attraction and at the same time present them with a fully biblical Gospel that can transform their lives. We need to listen to the testimony of Christians choosing celibacy or finding that biblical holiness unleashes Grace to completely change their identity and sexuality. Commending same-sex marriage is a second best to amazing Grace; it is not loving people to the uttermost. Methodism needs to do better on subjects such as: what does 'welcoming without condoning' look like in practice? Are feelings paramount? How can healing, forgiving and new birth be disentangled? Should anyone be defined by their sexuality or are we all defined by our relationship to Jesus? How do we lovingly tell people that God's plan for heterosexual marriage is irresistibly excellent? By banishing these types of question, this report is banishing the answers that the church needs to be both biblical, loving and transformational.

Mission

By tracking modern social opinion, the report aims to avoid the Church's alienation, and improve its ability to do outreach. Perversely, in so doing it fails to build a distinctive counter-culture which reflects God's Kingdom and is of necessity at odds with a fallen world. The early church, created a radical counter-culture which brought angst and persecution but formed an irresistible springboard for mission and growth.

Where is the evidence that Methodism's insistence on compromise and 'relevance' in the last 100 years has unleashed revival and growth? On the contrary, growing churches today make radical demands of the many who join them, and build cultures to track the Kingdom and not the World.

These sprawling implications should come as no surprise. This report is but the latest step in the long-term use of liberal theology, moulding the church, demythologising the Bible, and removing the supernatural reality of a God who 'acts and speaks'. God has remained inspirational and totemic, but the Bible is regarded as 'what humans have to say about God instead of what He has to say about us.' Thus, this overlong report does its reasoning the wrong way around. It very perceptively describes changes in secular opinion but then manufactures its theology, cherry picking the Bible for support. The Derby Declarations of 1993 showed this 'direction of travel', a progressive narrative to encourage mission by staying in missional touch with the world. This report is merely the latest step on that journey. It reveals a total shift away from the mainstream evangelical tradition, not just a few biblical fundamentalists worried about marriage, but away from the broad foundation of biblical holiness upon which Methodism was founded. It is this entire direction of travel that must be resisted and reversed. The report quotes John Wesley's call for tolerance "as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity', but this is precisely what this report threatens to do.

Imagine an iceberg about to sink the Methodist church. Its roots, deep beneath the surface, lie with over a century of liberal theology freezing the spiritual life out of the church. Having largely gone un-noticed it broke the surface with the Derby declarations, and now with this report adorned with a rainbow flag it has caught everyone's attention. A belated change of direction is needed.