The Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships: A Response to “Faith, Hope, and Love.”

John Goldingay

When I lived in England, I knew quite well two women who had lived together for most of their adult lives. I have reason to think it was a celibate relationship, but I have no basis for knowing whether they felt any sexual attraction. I can imagine them giving each other a kiss or a hug before they went to bed each night in their separate bedrooms. I might call their relationship quasi-covenantal; in their latter years, one of them had a stroke, and the other looked after her and continued to make it possible for them to share a church involvement and to take holidays together. The one on whom fell the major responsibility for caring once commented wryly on the similarity of her situation and mine, because I had a similar responsibility for my disabled wife.

It has been instructive for me to reflect on the “faith, hope, and love” expressed in that relationship, and I could be glad to pray for God’s blessing on it—indeed, I probably did so. I am sad that it is harder nowadays for such relationships to happen and to flourish without their being imagined to be something else.

Most of the essay on “Faith, Hope, and Love” comprises helpful reminders on the church’s mission, on blessing, on covenant, and on unity. But how far do these reminders apply to the blessing of same-sex relationships (with the connotations this phrase has in our culture)? The essay refers to the earlier study commissioned by the House of Bishops, which issued in a report outlining a “liberal” and a “traditionalist” position regarding same-sex relationships. I was a member of the traditionalist group within the task force that produced the study. “Faith, Hope, and Love” goes with the liberal position, as it must if it is to provide support for the development of resources for the blessings of same-sex relationships. My comments here, therefore, largely restate aspects of the traditionalist position.

First, the biblical arguments. To begin with, let us agree that Genesis 18—19 is irrelevant in light of the fact that no one is arguing for the kind of sexual relationships described there. On the other hand, one might note that scripture does speak of same-sex relationships such as those between Naomi and Ruth and between David and Jonathan that offer models for thinking about relationships like that between my two friends. (It has of course been speculated that the two biblical relationships were same-sex relationships in our sense, but the stories offer no pointer to that possibility—and the Old Testament does not shy away from referring to sex when it is a significant aspect of a narrative; further, it is unlikely that the books describing these relationships would have envisaged that possibility, or that the books would have found acceptance into the canon of scripture on that hypothesis.)

The arguments that Genesis 1—2 need not imply a validation of hetero-sexual relationships alone are not convincing. Genesis 1 talks about male and female in connection with the fulfillment of God s purpose in creation and the fruitfulness of humankind. Humanity’s blessing and proliferation though heterosexual relationships is implied in the creation of male and female. The traditionalist document quotes Anglican biblical scholar Gordon Wenham, writing on Genesis: “Here… we have a clear statement of the divine purpose of marriage: positively, it is for the procreation of children; negatively, it is a rejection of the ancient oriental fertility cults.” Genesis 2:24 is explicitly about heterosexual marriage: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” While “one flesh” may suggest more than their sexual relationship, it hardly means less. Further, one reason why it is not good for the man to be alone is that he cannot generate children. He needs help if he is to do so. Procreation is integral to marriage’s purpose, and is the reason why marriage involves a man and a woman. So the centerpiece in the vision of human marriage in Genesis is not intimacy, relationship, or romance, but family. The man and the woman will be the means and context in which the family will grow so as to serve God and the land. This point in itself does not exclude same-sex marriages, but it does not point to their being an equally valid option.

In Romans 1, sexual relationships between people of the same sex are an expression of human waywardness and of the rejection of the truth, and a result of God’s wrath operating in the world. It is important to note that Paul sees such relationships as a *result* of God’s wrath operating against sin in the world, not a *cause* of that wrath. Heterosexual people are as much implicated in this waywardness (not least in our sexual relationships) as people involved in same-sex relationships, which is reason for us to identify with our brothers and sisters involved in same-sex relationships, not to repudiate or shame them.

First Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10 offers a list of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God, a list that includes people involved in homosexual behavior and people who are greedy, rebellious, and guilty of certain other sins—the lists do not look as if they are intended to be comprehensive and do not imply that a distinctive shame attaches to that particular sin. Both passages use the term *arsenokoitai,* which denotes men who lie with another man as with a woman. It echoes the proscription in Leviticus, and thus suggests that the New Testament understands Leviticus to be proscribing a practice that was more than a matter of purity and impurity. First Corinthians 6:9 also use the word *malakoi,* a term in Hellenistic Greek for someone who is the passive partner in a same-sex relationship. The use of both terms undermines the argument that these passages are especially concerned with pederasty.

On the basis of its study of such passages, the traditionalist argument in the report to the House of Bishops concluded, “The one-flesh pattern of heterosexual marriage in Genesis was the background for the descriptions of sinful behavior in the letters to Timothy, to the Corinthians, and to the Romans. Because homosexual behavior was more common in the Greco-Roman world, there was a need to update and expand the list of actions contrary to the Decalogue by including homosexual behavior along with theft, adultery, and so on.”

It would be more realistic to infer that the scriptures’ perspective on this subject is limited than to infer that our culture enables us to clarify its meaning as being open to affirming same-sex relationships.

Second, the question of mission and context. In the world as it was designed “from the beginning,” marriage involved the lifelong commitment of one man and one woman as the context for raising a family. At least four forms of relationship come one point short of that vision: polygamy; marriage that avoids having children; marriage in which one person has a still-living divorced partner; and same-sex relationships.

To express the matter thus is not to imply that all these four forms of relationship have the same theological or ethical status, but I find it helpful to see that there is a partial analogy between them. For me, one reason is that within my broad family circle and circle of friends are marriages that involve a partner whose former spouse is still living, a marriage where the couple has avoided having children, people who are in same-sex relationships, and someone who comes from a polygamous marriage. I would like to be able to seek God’s blessing on such marriages and relationships, but I am unclear in what sense I can do so, as I could for the couple I described at the beginning of this response to the essay.

Two of those four forms of union appear in scripture; two do not. I find it helpful to look at the two that do not appear in light of the way scripture speaks of the two that do.

Jesus explicitly discusses divorce, and provides the helpful insight into the Torah that the Torah deals with both the ideal world (how things were from the beginning) and how things are in the world we know, where human hardness of heart is a reality. Deuteronomy’s acceptance of divorce belongs in the latter category. Jesus does not bring a new standard of his own to the question, but affirms the visionary standard within the Torah. Elsewhere, he describes the entirety of the Torah and the Prophets as an outworking of love for God and love for one’s neighbor, and one can see how this description applies to the Deuteronomic rule that presupposes divorce. Marriages do break down, and in a traditional society women may then be in an especially vulnerable position. The rule about giving a woman divorce papers is an expression of love that offers them some protection.

The Torah and the Prophets also acknowledge the practice of polygamy. They implicitly recognize problems polygamy can solve; they certainly portray problems it can generate. They do not explicitly say that it stands in tension with the creation vision for marriage, but this inference seems plausible. I can imagine Jesus taking a similar view of polygamy to the one he takes of divorce.

The Bible does not refer to the committed, covenantal same-sex relationships that are presupposed by our discussion of blessing such relationships, but I take them to have a similar status. They, too, do not correspond to the creation ideal but reflect the reality of human hardness of heart. Paul’s comments in Romans encourage us to think not so much in terms of the individual hardness of heart of the people involved in these relationships, but of the hard heartedness of humanity as a whole.

Considering these four issues together also helps us take into account the sociological and cultural factors involved in our thinking about these relationships, to which the essay refers in the section on mission. On one hand, fifty years ago divorce was much less common than is now the case, and the church did not marry divorced people (as a newly-ordained priest in England, I recall initiating the arrangement for a couple’s wedding before it transpired that the man was describing himself as a bachelor on the basis that he was no longer married). Twenty-five years ago, I blessed the marriage of a woman and a man who had been divorced; in England, I could not have done so in a church, but I could in our seminary chapel (the woman is now an archdeacon). In the twenty-first century, one of my own bishops has commented that she is hesitant about approving a marriage for someone who has been twice-divorced, but she sometimes does so. A big change in attitude and practice to divorce in the church has come about not because we have studied scripture and the church’s tradition more, but because of sociological factors and cultural factors. There are positive and negative aspects to this development.

With regard to same-sex-relationships, there are parallel sociological and cultural considerations. One is the general sexualization of U.S. culture. Another is the collapse of the old family structures of which unattached people could be part (the study’s material on household is helpful in this connection). Related is the general assumption that people will be involved in sexual activity, and the apparent quaintness of the idea that it should not be so. Another is the ease with which people of same-sex attraction can engage in sexual activity without thereby earning public disapproval. Another is the increasing legal recognition of same-sex partnerships or marriage in Western countries. A further aspect of the cultural shift is the assumption that marrying someone of the same sex is simply a matter of proper freedom and choice. There is no moral difference between the two forms of relationship. That view also seems obvious to many Christians, who then add that neither is any theological difference involved.

Yet while same-sex relationships thus seem as “natural” to some people as heterosexual relationships seem, the jury is still out on the scientific questions on same-sex relationships, as is noted in the study of “Biological Mechanisms in Homosexuality: A Critical Review” in Philip Groves (ed.), *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: A Resource to Enable Listening and Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2008).

The essay’s section on mission notes these cultural circumstances in which we take part in God’s mission, and in particular the “shift in cultural perspectives” on sexuality. It can be read as implying that we must go along with the cultural shift. Yet there surely can be cultural shifts that we do not go along with. The fact that there is a cultural shift is a fact that we need to take into account, but our mission might be to confront it, not baptize it. One way we might be able to get some perspective on cultural shifts and on our relationship to them is by looking at ourselves from the perspective of people in other cultures, and particularly other churches. We might note the analogy between the way many Western people are appalled by polygamy, while many people in traditional societies are appalled by same-sex relationships or serial monogamy. It is particularly unfortunate that we as a church do not seek to look at ourselves from other perspectives in this way and can seem simply to assume that we are the enlightened.

Nor does acceptance of same-sex relationships parallel the abolition of slavery, the proscribing of racism, the elimination of woman’s subordination, or the acceptance of women’s ordination. In each of these areas, there is material in scripture that explicitly expresses what I have called God’s vision as well as material that makes allowance for human hardness of heart. There is nothing in scripture that expresses a vision for same-sex relationships.

I close with a further adaptation of words from the traditionalist submission to the House of Bishops. The lack of clarity concerning same-sex attraction on the part of biological and social scientists, the wounds in much of the rest of the Anglican Communion caused by our unilateral action, and the apparent implications of scripture and the church’s tradition, all make it hard to see how the essay’s useful material on blessing can be applied to same-sex relationships.

I appreciate the fact that the essay itself closes with a challenge concerning Christian unity and biblical interpretation. I know priests who are afraid that the time will come when a bishop will withhold a license from them if they are not prepared to bless same-sex relationships or (in due course) to conduct same-sex marriages. It will be nice if the essay’s closing challenge will mean that people who do not accept the church’s new stance on same-sex relationships will not be excluded from its ministry.