



A STEP TOO FAR

*a comment on the report to the
2006 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland
by the Legal Questions Committee
concerning the Church's response to civil partnerships*

forward together

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A Kirk Committee is proposing that ministers should be allowed to conduct services to mark civil partnerships (popularly known as ‘gay blessings’ or ‘gay marriages’).

This would be a major departure from the clear teaching of the Bible, and from 2,000 years of Christian practice.

These proposals are likely to cause widespread dismay to church members across the land, and should be respectfully but firmly opposed at the 2006 General Assembly.

This booklet has been written and published by the Kirk’s evangelical group Forward Together. We believe that on this issue there will be broad agreement across the Church that the Committee’s proposals are a step too far.

INTRODUCTION

Should the Church always follow where society leads?

In a rapidly-changing world, that is a pressing question. Last December the Government brought in a law recognising ‘civil partnerships’ for same-sex couples. Now the General Assembly is being invited by its Legal Questions Committee (Reports, page 6.4/9) to pass a Declaratory Act permitting ministers and deacons of the Church to ‘conduct a service marking a civil partnership.’

If accepted, the proposals would be a significant departure from the teaching of the Bible, from the uniform practice of nearly 2,000 years of Christianity, and from the accepted practice of the major Christian denominations throughout the world today. Such a departure would be a very grave step. It would endanger the unity of the church. It would be a step too far.

This booklet is being sent to all ministers of the Church, and to other commissioners to the 2006 General Assembly. It explains why some commissioners will be asking the Assembly not to take the step being proposed, but instead to make a clear statement that Church of Scotland ministers and deacons should not conduct services to ‘mark’ civil partnerships.

WHAT IS THE KIRK’S CURRENT VIEW ON HUMAN SEXUALITY?

Discussions about human sexuality have taken place at the General Assembly for some decades now. Different views have been expressed, most notably in the inconclusive debates of the 1990s. But – contrary to what is sometimes believed - ***no deliverances affirming homosexual practice as appropriate Christian behaviour have ever been agreed by a General Assembly.*** So those statements of previous Assemblies, with deliverances that affirm marriage and deny the appropriateness of same-sex practice, are still in force. Only by agreeing deliverances to the contrary could the Church be said to have definitively changed its view on this very important matter.

The most recent relevant statement of the Assembly in the context of a debate on homosexuality was in 2000: *'The General Assembly adhere to their previous decisions that affirm marriage as the normative context for heterosexual, permanent relationships and by extension as the appropriate environment in which to raise and nurture children.'* Significantly, there was no equivalent statement affirming any other sexual relationship. Deliverances of the General Assemblies of 1983 and 1967 could be fairly summarised as ruling out homosexual practice for the Christian, while affirming pastoral concern for those subject to temptation in this area.

In the Report of the Legal Questions Committee, there is no indication among the various 'bodies of opinions' described in section 15.3 as to what the current position of the Church actually is, or how diverse opinions on any theological or ethical matter within the Church are to be evaluated. The four listed opinions are described in terms that holders of those opinions might not readily recognise. The third group is particularly ill-drawn, and defined in wholly negative terms. This is most unfortunate, since it tends to give a distorted impression of what is in fact the historic position of all Christian churches, and of the overwhelming majority of churches today.

WHAT IS BEING PROPOSED?

The Legal Questions Committee (Reports, page 6.4/9) is proposing that the Assembly should pass a Declaratory Act (page 6.4/15, Appendix H) permitting ministers to 'conduct a service marking a civil partnership', while making clear that ministers will not be *obliged* to take such services against their consciences. The Report is being brought to the Assembly as a result of the change in the civil law last year. ***But that law does not require religious ceremonies – indeed, the whole point about all civil ceremonies is that they must EXCLUDE any religious component.*** The Report recognises this (section 15.8), but then goes on to propose a Declaratory Act of the General Assembly whose sole measure concerns ministers conducting (or refraining from conducting) religious services in the context of a civil partnership.

The Report notes that the parliamentary Act does not contain a presumption that civil partners are in a sexual relationship. But the Act

does not allow civil partnerships for caring relationships within a family (such as a niece caring for an aunt), or for heterosexual co-habitees. The link between civil partnerships and same-sex unions is perfectly clear, as the media have not been slow to point out. Partnerships are quite understandably described by many people as ‘Gay Marriages.’

The committee offers no view on whether ministers themselves should be entitled to enter into such partnerships. But this Act would, by default, open that door. Sometime in the not-too-distant future would come the claim of civil partners to live in manses as of right.

WHY OPPOSE THIS MEASURE?

There are two good reasons for opposing the proposal of the Legal Questions Committee:

It would enshrine something in the law of the Church which is clearly against the Word of God.

It would seriously threaten the unity of the Church, and would place the Church of Scotland firmly outside the historic practice of all Christian churches and the current practice of the vast majority of churches in the world today.

These reasons will now be considered more fully.

The Word of God

In the Church of Scotland, we are not free to make up our own ideas of right and wrong. We cannot follow Frank Sinatra and do it “my way.” For the Church, ‘the Word of God contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the supreme rule of faith and life.’ While some place great emphasis on the ‘Word of God’ being not identical with scripture but only ‘contained’ in it, even then it is clear that – according to the Church - ***it is only within the scriptures that the Word of God is located.***

This is not just a matter of a few ‘proof texts’ such as Leviticus 18:22, which rules out same-sex practice along with other unconventional sexual practices. The clear and consistent witness of the scriptures – both Old and New Testaments – is that sexual relations can only be said to have God’s blessing when they are enjoyed between one man and one woman in the permanent relationship of marriage. Jesus Himself clearly endorsed and affirmed the male-female covenant bond of marriage as the sexual norm (Matthew 19:5). After the Gospel moved out of its Jewish heartland to the very different context of the pagan Roman Empire, Paul spoke clearly against same-sex practice (Romans 1:26-27). He also pointed out that the door is always open for those who seek forgiveness (1 Corinthians 6:11). In this matter, the New Testament simply confirms the Old.

By enacting the Committee’s proposals, the Church of Scotland would for the first time enshrine in a clear and public way in the Law of the Church something which the Bible unambiguously calls sin.

The Unity of the Church

It is well-known that the worldwide Anglican Church is facing a fractured future on this matter. The Archbishop of Canterbury has recently appealed to those provinces ‘pushing the boundaries’ in terms of same-sex ordinations and blessings to desist from so doing in order to preserve the unity of the Church. He is thereby clearly placing the responsibility for any future fractured unity with those who seek to overturn the Church’s historic position. Nobody wants such a situation to develop in the Church of Scotland.

Adopting these proposals would cause dismay to the great majority of church members up and down the land, with consequences that cannot be foreseen. It would also impair ecumenical relations with other major denominations in Scotland by placing the Kirk very much out on a limb. Furthermore, it would be very unhelpful to inter-faith relations, by confirming the views of those members of other faiths who think that western Christianity has become decadent.

By enacting the Committee's proposals, the Church of Scotland would for the first time enshrine in a clear and public way in the Law of the Church something that the historic practice of all churches, and the overwhelming current practice of the world church today, considers to be wrong.

ISN'T THIS HOMOPHOBIA?

Opposition to the Committee's proposals is likely to be described as homophobic.

The term 'homophobia' means an irrational fear or hatred of homosexuality or, by extension, of homosexual persons. Such fear and hatred is of course unworthy of any Christian.

But the term 'homophobia' is also being used in a much broader sense, to mean any disagreement – however mildly expressed – with the agenda of a vociferous gay and lesbian lobby to move society away from the traditional family being viewed as the norm. By confusing the two senses of the word, any meaningful critique or discussion of any part of that agenda becomes by definition off-limits and branded 'homophobic.' This has largely stifled public discussion of this matter in society at large. ***It should not be allowed to stifle legitimate debate within the Church, particularly when what is being proposed is such a drastic break with the past.***

Love in relationships is very precious indeed, a gift of the God who is love. But the same Bible that tells us 'God is love' (1 John 4:8) also tells us that the sexual expression of love in same-sex relationships is not for the Christian. The teaching of the Word of God, and the historic position of all churches, is that the *practice* of homosexual relations is not God's will for humanity. But it is also important that those who may struggle with homosexual inclinations and temptations should be supported sympathetically. After all, we are all sinners in need of grace and forgiveness – whether the temptation we are prone to is pilfering, gossiping, temper, stinginess, oppressing employees, heterosexual sin or homosexual sin. But nobody is helped to overcome temptation if the

Church rebrands it as somehow not sin at all. ***It would cut the ground from under those homosexual Christians who are winning the struggle to overcome temptation if the Church chose to publicly celebrate or cherish something that is wrong.*** We cannot ask God to bless something He has forbidden.

A COUNTER-PROPOSAL

It has been argued above that the draft Declaratory Act proposed by the Legal Questions Committee should be rejected as contrary to the ‘Word of God contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments’ and likely to do serious damage to the unity of the Church. But to reject the draft Act without suggesting a replacement would also be deeply unsatisfactory. It would give the impression that the Church of Scotland is not concerned one way or the other as to the appropriateness of a ‘service marking a civil partnership.’ It is time for the Church to speak clearly on this matter, as other churches have done.

The Committee’s Report (section 15.11) sees ‘some parallels’ with ministerial practice in relation to re-marriage of divorced persons in church, where the decision is left to the individual minister. But the two cases could hardly be more different. Divorce and re-marriage are allowed for in certain circumstances both in the Bible and in the Church’s ‘subordinate standard’ – the Westminster Confession of Faith. There is of course no such parallel in the case of homosexual practice. A default ‘do as you please’ policy may chime with secular ideas of tolerance, but it is hardly the way forward for the Church.

For these reasons, it is intended to move a counter-motion on the floor of the Assembly, asking that it pass an Act debarring ministers and deacons from conducting services to mark civil partnerships. By doing this, the Church will demonstrate its adherence to the historic practice of all Christian churches, and the current practice of the great majority of major churches in the world today.

