

SHOULD SAME-SEX MARRIAGE BE REJECTED OR CELEBRATED BY CHRISTIANS?

By Savitri Hensman

The possibility of opening up marriage in Britain by law to same-sex couples has been criticised by some Christians but welcomed by others. One of the more thoughtful critics is theologian John Milbank, who has eloquently expressed some common arguments against change. This essay suggests that, while he raises important issues, his analysis is ultimately flawed. Taking into account such topics as tradition, sexual 'complementarity', childbearing and sacrament, there is a strong case for equal marriage.

1. Responding to proposals for equal marriage

In late 2011, the Scottish government undertook a consultation on opening up civil marriage to same-sex couples. In March 2012, the UK government began to consult on equal marriage in England and Wales. At present, same-sex couples in the UK can form civil partnerships (which confer similar legal rights to marriage) but cannot have marriages registered.

In several other countries, too, debates about equal marriage have been taking place, and in some places it has been introduced.

Among Christians, as in the wider public, opinion is divided. Some – though not all – leaders have been vocally opposed, including Cardinal Keith O'Brien, who condemned proposals for equal marriage as "a grotesque subversion of a universally accepted human right",¹ Archbishops Vincent Nichols and Peter Smith, who sent a more measured pastoral letter,² and Archbishop John Sentamu.³ The Church of England's response to the government consultation on equal civil marriage, published in June 2012, also objected forcefully,⁴ though many members take a different view.⁵

There have also been scholarly arguments against legal recognition of same-sex marriage, notably British theologian John Milbank's piece 'Gay marriage and the future of human sexuality' on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's website,⁶ and Andrew Goddard's Fulcrum paper 'Should we Redefine Marriage?'⁷ Milbank usefully outlines some of the key areas of disagreement.

2. John Milbank's criticisms of proposals for marriage equality

(a) A changing approach to marriage?

Milbank claims that:

the arguments put forward by the coalition government in favour of legalising gay marriage have been, appropriately, at once liberal and conservative. In liberal terms it is seen as a matter of equal rights; in conservative terms a matter of promoting the good of faithful, long-term relationships for homosexual as well as heterosexual people.

Those resisting the change - mostly, but not entirely, religious people - argue that the issue is being framed in the wrong way.

To him, marriage is essentially heterosexual, and underpins society, which:

at least until recently, led many gays themselves to argue that it is not an institution appropriate to homosexual practice. It is bound up with the securing of those kinship structures - of both horizontal affinities and vertical generations - which have always been central to the very constitution of human society.

Hence, marriage has to do with the "exchange" of men and women between social groups and with the procreation of children that secures the extension of lineages. Sometimes, and especially with the advance of time (as in the case of Christianity), the personal union of man with woman has also been granted a special symbolic value and has been seen as offering a specially intense degree of spiritual intimacy.

Homosexuality has always existed in human societies... But it has never previously been linked to marriage - apart from parodic instances (as in ancient Rome) or marginal situations where for various reasons (including those of transgender) a male or female marital role is "performed" by someone not of that gender.

So there is no reason to suppose that those opposing gay marriage are necessarily opposed to homosexual practice as such. The issue is rather: Why should it now be thought that an inherently heterosexual institution should be extended to gay relations also?

The main reason, in his view, is a flawed approach to equality in politics today which involves:

a refusal to entertain notions of public rights and obligations that might pertain to one sex rather than to the other, or to one sexual orientation rather than another.

In his view, treating same-sex unions as marriage, far from advancing justice, would mean that:

heterosexual people would no longer have the right to enter into an institution understood to be only possible for heterosexuals, as doubly recognising both the unique social significance of male/female relationship and the importance of the conjugal act which leads naturally to the procreation of children who are then reared by their biological parents.

There are two other reasons, Milbank suggests, for the current drive to open up marriage to same-sex couples:

The first is the decline of any public recognition of sexual difference... The second, and arguably most important factor, is the technologisation of childbirth, allied to the increased acceptance of the adoption of children by gay couples.

Since the link between sex and childbirth is becoming increasingly tenuous, heterosexual marriage is increasingly connected with child-rearing rather than with procreation. In which case, indeed, why should not gay couples sustain the same connection with an equal capacity?

(b) How important is gender difference?

In Milbank's view, gender difference arises from nature and is of crucial importance, which modern society tends not to acknowledge sufficiently:

It is notable that even the churches do not seem to dare to address the first issue of sexual difference, despite the fact that they recognise the validity of childless heterosexual marriage, that they have in modern times increasingly stressed mutual affection as one of the goods of the married state...

It would seem that when it is denied that a woman's body or biology has any psychic correlate, that then her purely physical difference gets vastly over-accentuated and exploited...

Equally, the increased crisis of the masculine psyche suggests that we cannot just remove by fiat the greater propensity of men towards danger, risk, physicality, objectivity, transcendence and the need to be in charge.

...the issue of sexual difference and complementarity needs to be readdressed... it would seem clear that part of what has made marriage work, and indeed made it an exceptionally strong bond for millennia, is the asymmetry of perspectives and roles.

...allowing that all generalisations are of course weak and constantly subject to exception, women tend to be actively receptive, embracing and inter-personal. Men tend to be attentively active, outreaching and object-orientated.

This is not to say that the sexes are unequal or that women should not be allowed to work outside the home and men should have no domestic role. But, in Milbank's view, there is an essential, and extremely important difference, which helps to make marriage special:

there are good reasons to suppose that sexual complementarity is crucial to the human order - just as it is crucial to the natural order, and perhaps even to the cosmic order, as many mythologies and religions have supposed. This is surely part of the reason why heterosexual marriage has received special public recognition and encouragement.

Same-sex relationships, in his view, can be important but not to the same degree, and the gay minority face additional emotional and ethical challenges:

Heterosexuals are in solidarity with members of their own sex, who may also become their rivals, and conversely they are attracted to the opposite sex. But homosexuals are at once in solidarity, rivalry and relations of attraction to their own sex which... tends to increase exponentially the contagion of mimetic desire and its resulting agon, not to mention the augmentation of narcissism.

On the other hand, homosexuals are neither in a relation of solidarity with nor attraction to the opposite sex, but may well sometimes be in a relationship of rivalry... there can, to some extent, be a solidarity of homosexual perspective with the opposite sex, grounded in the fact that both share the same sexual object - but notoriously this can often be contrived, fragile and particularly subject to betrayal.

Does this structural analysis imply that homosexuality is necessarily a sinister reality? Certainly not - but it does suggest that a homosexual destiny is a particularly strenuous fate and ethical task. However, where this yoke is genuinely assumed, then there are also perhaps special unique gains which make a crucial social contribution.

Same-sex relationships do not have the same social impact or symbolic significance as heterosexual marriage, he suggests:

more radical gays have a point in suggesting that fidelity and longevity of relationships do not have exactly the same imperative for a homosexual logic which tends, in its more sublime form, towards a human solidarity in general.

This is not, of course, to deny that permanence and exclusivity of gay relationships should not be encouraged, but it does suggest that the breakdown of these relationships is not the same social catastrophe as the collapse of a heterosexual marriage. This is partly because children are more often involved, partly because it more often tends to pull apart families linked through the marriage alliance, but also because the breakdown of a heterosexual relationship has more the appearance of a symbolic catastrophe as an instance of the failure of the permanent union of the two halves of the human race which are necessary for its procreative continuity.

(c) Protecting children's welfare?

Milbank urges rejection of surrogate motherhood and sperm donation, emphasising instead the cultural and religious importance of procreation arising from heterosexual sex, even promiscuous. Otherwise, he claims, family and social relationships lose value, leaving people reliant on state and markets to connect them:

both common-sense and empirical research suggest that the optimum condition for children is to be brought up by two parents of the opposite sex who are also their biological parents. Again this is a generalisation

... just as an orphanage does not involve a collective marriage, so also the allowing to gay couples of a child-rearing function does not of itself amount to an argument that they should be treated as "married."

... a genuinely Catholic view will not be surprised to learn that the family was, from the outset, embedded in general ritual and social norms. Indeed, heterosexual exchange and reproduction has been hitherto the very "grammar" of social relating as such.

Therefore the abandonment of this grammar implies a society no longer primarily constituted by extended kinship, but rather by state control and merely monetary exchange and reproduction. The diminution of the role of kinship would here be of one piece with the decline of the role of locality and mediating institutions in general.

For the individual, the experience of a natural-cultural unity is most fundamentally felt in the sense that her natural birth is from an interpersonal (and so "cultural") act of loving encounter - even if this be but a one-night stand. This provides a sense that one's very biological roots are suffused with an interpersonal narrative - which can become an image for the idea that the natural world is the work of a personal creation.

Thus to lose this "grammar" would be to compromise our deepest sense of humanity - and risk a further handing over of power to market and state tyrannies

Even if heterosexual relationships cannot result in having babies, he argues that they resemble those that do, whereas:

a gay relationship cannot qualify as a marriage in terms of its orientation to having children, because the link between an interpersonal and a natural act is entirely crucial to the definition and character of marriage.

The fact that this optimum condition cannot be fulfilled by many valid heterosexual marriages is entirely irrelevant, for they still fulfil through ideal intention this linkage, besides sustaining the union of sexual difference which is the other aspect of marriage's inherently heterosexual character.

(d) Promoting Christian marriage?

While, in Milbank's opinion, it may be impossible to stop same-sex marriage from being legally recognised, the church can still take action to promote traditional marriage:

Christians are likely to frame the debate over gay marriage in terms of the true human good, the proper goals that human beings should aim for. Secular people, on the other hand, are likely to reject the idea that such goals can be objectively shared in common, and to frame the debate in terms of rights and private utility.

For this reason the Church needs already to face the fact that it is quite likely to lose this debate, even if it should still try to win it. But if it does lose it, then how should it respond?

Here the question of whether marriage is primarily a natural or a sacramental reality is of crucial importance. I have already indicated how the ethnographic evidence suggests that it is simultaneously both. And this is how it has been regarded in the Latin Western tradition.

A marriage is primarily a de facto reality made by a consenting couple, without necessarily the involvement of either parents or clergy. However, it remains nonetheless a symbol of the bridal unity between Christ and his Church, which for St

Paul is equivalent to the unity between God and the Cosmos. (Clearly, the centrality of this symbolism rules out the possibility of Christian gay marriage.)

He considers, but rejects, the notion of entirely separating religious and civil recognition of relationships:

it is desirable that the state give every possible legal and fiscal encouragement to marriage as a key institution of social bonding. And for the same reason Christians cannot remain satisfied with the argument that specifically heterosexual marriage remains possible for them through the agency of the Church.

However, it becomes a useful foil in the event of the universal advent of gay marriage. For then, instead of banging its head against a cognitive brick wall, the proper response of the Church should be to deem marriage under civil law a failed experiment and to resume its sacramental guardianship of marriage.

Unlike some opponents of equal marriage, he urges that civil partnerships be blessed, pointing to:

the likelihood of a ferocious debate within the Anglican Church about allowing gay Church weddings. Indeed, this debate has the capacity to lead to eventual schism.

In order to seek to prevent such an outcome, it may well be best if the Anglican Church were to move swiftly to permit the blessing of gay civil partnerships in church...

The possibility of blessing same-sex friendships was already mooted by the Russian Orthodox philosophy Pavel Florensky early in the twentieth century, and while he made no mention of any homosexual character to these unions, it could well be argued that this silence continues to be advisable. For there is a certain sense in which physical love between members of the same sex is not "sex," as this term clearly implies sexual difference. Issues of acceptable modes of physical encounter (as in the case of heterosexual couples also) should surely be left to individuals and their confessors...

Perhaps, from a naturalistic point of view, animal homosexuality is an accidental spin-off from procreant drives, and perhaps, equally, from a theological point of view, it can be taken as a feature merely of a fallen cosmos. Yet it seems more plausible to argue that homosexual behaviour can serve some purposes of social solidarity and that, in the human case, gay people may tend to have a very specific social role to perform within the created order, if they are able to negotiate positively the logic of the homosexual condition.

Though, he claims, the majority of the UK population would favour keeping marriage for heterosexuals only:

it may well be that in the UK as elsewhere, liberal-metropolitan opinion will prevail... In that case, the Church will need both to continue to deny that the state has the power to change the definition of marriage, and to offer a defence of nature under the embrace of sacramental grace.

Here the major weapon in its cultural armoury is the offer of a traditional Church wedding. Christians need to do all they can to promote the attractiveness of this event - which should include the churches getting involved in the offering of "total wedding packages."... a secondary objective might also be achieved of reducing the ludicrously extravagant sums that are increasingly spent on weddings by people that can ill afford them. Of course these packages need to be backed-up by better pre- and post-marriage guidance than is offered elsewhere.

...the battle over gay marriage may well be lost, but this does not mean that Christians must also concede the war over the future of human sexuality.

3. Strengths and weaknesses of Milbank's arguments

John Milbank is probably right that the drive to open up marriage to same-sex couples is linked with changes in attitudes to gender. Moreover such a change deserves more consideration than some supporters of equal marriage might admit. Partnership is not a purely private relationship, and has social consequences.

The flaws in his argument include over-simplification of the ways in which gender difference has been, and is, lived out; insufficient attention to the actual experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people and indeed women in general; dubious assumptions about the common good; and lack of recognition of the radical nature of Christian calling.

(a) Sex and gender: biology and destiny

Among humans, like other mammals, there are biological differences between males and females, including – markedly – in gestation and childbirth. In history, females who survived until puberty would often have spent much of their remaining time and energy bearing and looking after children until their own death, during pregnancy or of other causes. Male lives too would often have been short and dominated by the struggle for survival.

Culturally, there have been differences between men and women in most societies, with some occupations and spheres of life reserved for one or the other. This persists to some extent even in the modern world.

However, even in ancient societies, biological sex did not always determine one's gender (and of course a certain proportion of people would have been intersex from birth). What is more, perceptions of 'natural' male and female characteristics are more variable than in Milbank's account, and it is all too easy to project a particular cultural pattern on to nature.

For example Aristotle, who believed that difference between the sexes and women's inferiority arose from nature, suggested that complementarity as well as procreation were part of the marital relationship:⁸ "from the start the functions are divided, and those of men and women are different; so they help each other by throwing their peculiar gifts into the common stock". From his observation "woman is more

compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears... more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory”.

Augustine of Hippo, however, saw things differently: “I don't see what sort of help woman was created to provide man with, if one excludes the purpose of procreation. If woman was not given to man for help in bearing children, for what help could she be? To till the earth together? If help were needed for that, man would have been a better help for man. The same goes for comfort in solitude. How much more pleasure is it for life and conversation when two friends live together than when a man and a woman cohabit?”⁹

“When a woman has relations with a man, she would like, as much as possible, to be lying with another man at the same time. Woman knows nothing of fidelity. Believe me, if you give her your trust, you will be disappointed,” declared Albert the Great, an important scholar in the thirteenth century.¹⁰ Yet others have characterised men as more naturally prone to promiscuity.

The notion that women and men were equal but naturally different was embraced by Edward H Clarke, one of those who argued on supposedly scientific grounds in the nineteenth century that too much education for girls was seriously damaging to their reproductive and general health.¹¹ Clarke stated that “Man is not superior to woman, nor woman to man. The relation of the sexes is one of equality, not of better and worse, or of higher and lower. By this it is not intended to say that the sexes are the same... much of the discussion of the irrepressible woman-question, and many of the efforts for bettering her education and widening her sphere, seem to ignore any difference of the sexes”.¹² But his assertions about the ‘natural’ dangers of higher education have been shown to be utterly wrong.

Likewise, while men are more competitive than women in many societies, elsewhere this pattern is reversed.¹³

What is more, while gender is an important aspect of identity, so too are ethnicity, class, disability, age and so forth. When Milbank asserts that “homosexuals are neither in a relation of solidarity with nor attraction to the opposite sex, but may well sometimes be in a relationship of rivalry”, why should they not be in solidarity if, say, they are trade unionists in the same workplace, parent and child or members of the same football club, or indeed on the basis of common humanity? Likewise, if complementarity is indeed an important facet of a relationship, can this not be based on personality, skills and interests?¹⁴

Much of the time, his analysis seems to be based more on an idealised view involving archetypes rather than the complex and sometimes untidy world which men and women actually inhabit.

(b) ‘Traditional’ marriage

Milbank is correct in his claim that, historically, marriage¹⁵ has generally been between men and women, though he plays down the significance of the fact that their social roles have not always corresponded to their biological sex.¹⁶ It is noteworthy that throughout history, relationships which might today be regarded as gay, lesbian or involving a trans partner have often been socially recognised.

Not surprisingly however, in pre-modern times, when average life expectancy was about thirty, death in infancy was common and an epidemic could wipe out perhaps half the population of Europe in four years, having babies tended to be a high priority, in the hope that at least one or two might survive to adulthood.

Milbank appears to believe that emphasis on procreation, the interests of extended families and stable lifelong marriage have traditionally gone together, but these may in fact be conflicting. A dutiful son might well be expected to divorce his wife if she was childless, or if another match might be more advantageous for his extended family. In addition, when childbirth carried a high risk, the relative expendability of wives was a consequence of prioritising childbearing.

Patterns of family life in ancient times could be complex, even if partners remained married, like Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament. According to Genesis, because of Sarah's childlessness, she has a surrogate child, Ishmael, through her slave Hagar, with whom Abraham has sex. But later, when Sarah gives birth directly, Hagar and Ishmael are driven out into the desert. In Exodus, baby Moses is adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, though nursed by his birth-mother. Young Samuel, in 1 Samuel, is brought up not by his mother and father (who has another wife too) but by elderly priest Eli in the temple.

Continuity of parenting was not assured by 'traditional' marriage even if both parents survived and remained married. In Rome (as in other parts of the ancient world), adoption – often of children whose birth-parents were still alive – was common, and Paul used this as a metaphor for believers' relationship with God.¹⁷ In addition, Roman law allowed a father to kill his children, and in various other ancient societies children were often killed.¹⁸

The family life of ordinary men, women and children, especially if they were slaves or serfs, could also be subject to the interests and whims of the upper classes.

There are still communities in which the welfare of women, young adults and children is subordinate to the economic interests and prestige of the extended family or tribe, and life in such surroundings can be less than idyllic. Of course in some 'traditional societies' there were some happily married faithful couples with harmonious extended families and well cared-for children, but this pattern was by no means guaranteed.

John Milbank's explanation of why a marriage unable to result in babies is valid is also unclear. His view is not as extreme as that of Keith O'Brien, who declared that "marriage has always existed in order to bring men and women together so that the children born of those unions will have a mother and a father". Yet Milbank's assertion that "a gay relationship cannot qualify as a marriage in terms of its orientation to having children... The fact that this optimum condition cannot be fulfilled by many valid heterosexual marriages is entirely irrelevant, for they still fulfil through ideal intention this linkage" is puzzling.

If a couple in their seventies get married, they do not usually intend to have babies, nor is that the reason why their wedding guests might celebrate alongside them.

Many heterosexual married couples do a wonderful job of parenting, and this should be celebrated, but marriages can take different forms and still be valid.

(c) The realities of today's world

In any case, there is little possibility of bypassing centuries of technological, economic and social change and going back to an earlier era. By the late middle ages, in some part of Europe young people were enjoying greater independence and choosing their own spouses.¹⁹

Today, amidst rapid growth of knowledge and change in workplace organisation, it would be impractical – even if it were desirable – for boys to be expected to pursue the same trade as their fathers and learn all they need to through apprenticeship while girls do the same with their mothers. And while modern marriages may involve profound connections between in-laws, this tends to be based on interpersonal connection rather than duty to an institution, and can apply to same-sex as well as opposite-sex partnerships.

While economic injustice means that many of the world's inhabitants still experience extreme poverty, in some societies the survival of infants is less precarious, and life expectancy has greatly increased. While at one time it might have appeared imperative for almost all humans to seek to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1.28), this is no longer the case: the world's population had risen from 1.7 billion at the beginning of the twentieth century to 7 billion by late 2011.²⁰ Having babies still has social value, but caring for children and adults and promoting sustainable development are at least as important.

Because of the changing age profile, probably almost half the married couples in some societies are incapable of conceiving ‘naturally’.²¹ Combined with changes in gender relations, married life may take very different forms from that prevalent just a couple of centuries ago, and address new challenges such as coping when a spouse develops dementia.

In addition, LGBT people have become more visible in many societies, and there is an increasing body of evidence on the impact of this diversity, which Milbank has largely failed to take into account. For instance, his apparent belief that a child is more likely to feel that her life results from an interpersonal act of loving encounter if she was conceived accidentally after a drunken heterosexual encounter than as the much-wanted and planned child of a same-sex couple could be tested against reality.

By and large, it would appear that the children of heterosexual and lesbian couples experience broadly similar outcomes, and the quality of parenting matters more than the sexual orientation of the parents.²² It should be remembered that a child brought up by two women or two men need not be deprived of role models of both sexes, any more than a child in a heterosexual household where one parent is away from long periods.

For both opposite-sex and same-sex couples, marriage to some extent is under pressure because of, and counters the impact of, a consumerist society. All too

often, things and people are quickly discarded if no longer convenient: for instance employers may shed large numbers of staff for a slight increase in profit. A stable and supportive home life can be particularly important for those who are economically and socially marginalised. Marriage, while influenced by the prevailing culture, can also have counter-cultural aspects.

Milbank fails adequately to address the reasons why so many people – heterosexuals included – perceive so much similarity between the married and long-term same-sex couples they know well that they colloquially refer to such partners as ‘married’. Nor does he properly consider the growing body of evidence emerging from regions and countries where same-sex marriage is legally recognised,²³ which does not indicate any significant negative effect on heterosexual marriage.

Marriage, in part because of its flexibility, is perhaps more durable than opponents of equal marriage suppose.

(d) A Christian approach to marriage

Milbank emphasises the sacramental nature of marriage, asserting that it is “a symbol of the bridal unity between Christ and his Church, which for St Paul is equivalent to the unity between God and the Cosmos”, and which “rules out the possibility of Christian gay marriage”. Presumably he is referring to Ephesians 5,²⁴ and its call for wives to “submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour”, while husbands should “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her”.

If this passage is interpreted as meaning that gender difference is central to marriage, since husbands are God-like to their wives, same-sex marriage is indeed ruled out. But such an interpretation would be unsatisfactory to many Christians today (including husbands who would like their wives to love and not just respect them), and at odds with the notion that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28). Indeed, it might be seen as verging on the idolatrous.

However, if the mutual delight and trustworthy companionship of marriage enable a deeper understanding of, and fuller response to, God’s love, this can indeed be good news today, whatever people’s gender identity and sexual orientation.

Milbank’s piece conveys little of the joy in Adam’s response when, in Genesis 2, God sees that it is not good for a human to be alone, and creates a companion who is of the same flesh, like him in a way that other animals are not. Nor is there much sense of the passionate eroticism of the Song of Songs, and excited anticipation implicit in the depiction in Revelation of the church as the bride of Christ.

There are some people for whom monastic celibacy, or another kind of friendship, is sufficient to assure them that they are beloved and enable them to grow in love. Yet for most people, heterosexual or LGBT, a sexually intimate, caring and committed relationship can be hugely significant in their emotional and spiritual growth, as well as being a source of pleasure and practical support.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love,” to quote the First Epistle of John. Marital love can be an important part of this. But – in contrast perhaps to the current government’s approach – love should not be confined to a couple and perhaps their children.

Whether in ‘traditional’ or modern societies, family units who enjoy their wealth untroubled by the needs of those outside their small circle, or who suffer poverty and exclusion, are far removed from the Christian ideal. Generosity and hospitality are at the heart of God’s love, and humans are called to reflect this.

In the Gospels, Jesus both proclaimed and embodied a kind of ‘family’ life which would have shocked many of his contemporaries.²⁵ Despite the emphasis on fertility in his day, all, including those who literally or metaphorically eunuchs, were welcomed, and Jesus himself was unmarried.²⁶ Instead of focusing on increasing the family’s prosperity and preserving its reputation, his followers were encouraged in the Sermon on the Mount to give to the needy, not heap up treasures on earth and rejoice when reviled for his sake (Matthew 5-7).

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household,” he declared in Matthew 10. His followers were called to seek the kingdom of God, helping to create a commonwealth of universal love and justice, even if this meant overturning patriarchal patterns of family life.

In John’s Gospel, he was depicted as being at the heart of a community of friends, whom he urged to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15.12). His followers were urged to exemplify a new way of life, marked by love that broke down barriers.

4. Promoting marriage

While there are distinctive features of heterosexual marriage, and indeed each marriage is unique, loving and faithful partnerships freely entered into have much in common, whether between opposite-sex or same-sex couples. Marriage can be spiritually enriching as well as a source of joy and comfort to heterosexual and LGBT people. Partners may also face a range of temptations, including to isolate themselves from their neighbours, instead of encouraging and supporting one another in good works.

John Milbank is correct that the church should celebrate and nurture marriage. However, this should be extended to same-sex couples who are willing to make the same commitment as their heterosexual counterparts. What is more, all couples should be called on to display in their married lives, and foster in wider society, values of generosity, mercy, humility and justice, welcoming the lonely and caring for the needy as well as rejoicing in and cherishing each other.

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- ¹⁶ See e.g. Eskridge WN Jr, 'A history of same-sex marriage', *Virginia Law Review*, 1993, http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/1504/
- ¹⁷ Burke T, 'Pauline Adoption: a Sociological Approach', *Evangelical Quarterly* 73:2 (2001), 119-134, http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/2001-2_119.pdf
- ¹⁸ Pitt SE and Bale EM, 'Neonaticide, Infanticide, and Filicide: A Review of the Literature', <http://www.jaapl.org/content/23/3/375.full.pdf>
- ¹⁹ De Moor T and van Zanden JL, 'Girl power: the European marriage pattern and labour markets in the North Sea region in the late medieval and early modern period', *Economic History Review* (2009), [http://vkc.library.uu.nl/vkc/seh/research/Lists/Working%20Papers/Attachments/68/De%20Moor%20and%20van%20Zanden%20-%20Girlpower%20\(ECHR\).pdf](http://vkc.library.uu.nl/vkc/seh/research/Lists/Working%20Papers/Attachments/68/De%20Moor%20and%20van%20Zanden%20-%20Girlpower%20(ECHR).pdf)
- ²⁰ Hensman S, 'Fruitful love', *Ekklesia*, 2011, <http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/node/15884>
- ²¹ See 'Population Estimates by Marital Status, Mid-2010', Office for National Statistics, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm:77-231283>, comparing the number of married women below and above the average age of menopause, and assuming that a minority of married couples are incapable of conceiving for other reasons
- ²² See e.g. Tasker F, 'Same-Sex Parenting and Child Development: Reviewing the Contribution of Parental Gender', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (February 2010): 35 – 40, <http://www.famigliarcobaleno.org/public/documenti/file/Same-Sex-Parenting-and-Child-Development.pdf>; Fond G *et al*, 'Homosexual parenthood and child development: Present data', *Encephale*, 2012 Feb;38(1):10-5, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22381718>

²³ See e.g. Badgett MV Lee, 'When Gay People Get Married: What Happens When Societies Legalize Same-Sex Marriage', *Journal of Homosexuality*, Volume 58, Issue 8, 2011, extracts <https://ecf.cand.uscourts.gov/cand/09cv2292/evidence/PX1273.pdf>, also interview with author on <http://lezgetreal.com/2009/09/when-gay-people-get-married-an-interview-with-author-m-v-lee-badgett/>; and Langbein L and Yost MA, Same-Sex Marriage and Negative Externalities, *Social Science Quarterly*, Volume 90, Number 2, June 2009, <http://gaymarriage.procon.org/sourcefiles/laura-langbein-Same-Sex-Marriage-and-Negative-Externalities.pdf>

²⁴ Though the authorship of Ephesians is disputed, it is at least heavily influenced by Paul's thought

²⁵ Good DJ, 'Changes in family life need not threaten Christians', *Ekklesia*, 27 April 2007, <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/5162>

²⁶ Matthew 19.10-12

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