

Presentation to General Synod 2017, Motion 6

Chair, Members of Synod,

We may be inclined to think that the proposed changes to Canon 31 do not alter in any significant way this Church's doctrine of Holy Matrimony, and that the only substantive change being proposed is to extend the scope of marriage. But such thinking would be incorrect, for the revised wording places in a position of prime importance, a statement apparently of such absolute truth that it has to be classified as a fact. I refer to the statement that "there are differing understandings of the nature of marriage in this Church."

It is proposed that this now becomes this Church's official position, enshrined henceforth in Canon law. I put it to you that the phrase "understanding of the nature of marriage" cannot be distinguished from "theology of marriage" or "doctrine of marriage." Henceforth, if this second reading is approved, this Church will endorse and legitimise multiple, undefined doctrines of Holy Matrimony.

Now some may argue that this statement is not one of aspiration but merely a recognition of the situation in which we find ourselves. Having differing understandings of marriage is not something we see as good or desirable. In that case why are we proposing to enshrine something that is neither good nor desirable into Canon Law?

Now this also raises another challenging question. We are all agreed that this Church has but one Head: Jesus Christ. Now in saying that this Church has differing understandings of the nature of marriage, are we implying that Jesus Himself, the Head of this Church, cannot make up His mind on the nature of marriage? I suspect not. But then, what are we saying? That we, the body of Christ, have a different view on marriage to Christ, who is our Head? Brothers and sisters, this cannot be so.

If there is one thing that unites us it is this: that Christ has commissioned us to make disciples, teaching them to observe everything He has taught and commanded. If there is uncertainty amongst us about marriage; if we have conflicting views as to its nature and scope, then it behoves us to seek a fresh understanding of and expression of Jesus' teaching. The secular society in which we live scrutinises us now with an intensity that is unprecedented in recent times. What message are we sending them – "We're as confused as you are"? No! We **must** declare, as we have always done, that this Church upholds what Jesus taught and instructed. If we do not adhere to His teaching then we are **not** the Church of Jesus Christ at all, but some other body.

I put it to this Synod that there is no other reasonable and responsible position to take than to reject this motion, and to call on the Faith and Order Board to articulate clearly the teaching of Jesus on marriage, and to derive appropriate guidelines to keep us faithful to this through any future deliberations on this matter.

S P Townsend, Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney.
Thursday 8 June 2017