

To PCQ Ministers and Elders From the Gospel in Society Today Team (GiST)

You will no doubt be aware that the Australian Government has called for a postal plebiscite to be held later this year on the question of legal recognition of same-sex marriages.

The Gospel in Society Today team has put together this sheet to give further help and encouragement to PCQ ministers, elders and congregation members leading up to the plebiscite. At this time, we want urge all to be prayerful for its outcome and consider carefully how you might best think, speak and act to honour the Lord Jesus.

PCQ members are likely to be experiencing the plebiscite announcement in a range of ways. Some will be feeling worried by our country's big step away from a Christian perspective on marriage. Some will be feeling confused or unclear. Those in our churches who experience same-sex attraction, or love those who do, could well be finding some conversations about the plebiscite uncomfortable or hurtful.

1. The Lord is King

It is natural that this plebiscite will raise people's anxiety. But let's remember how Jesus addresses our anxieties.

Jesus, the one who died for us, is the resurrected Lord. And he will be forever, even after the plebiscite. Whatever the result, Jesus will still be Lord. Even if it has all of the negative effects you may fear, no matter what happens, Jesus is the Lord who has our eternal destiny well in hand: *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body"* (Philippians 3:20-21). It would certainly help our anxiety to remember that. It would also be great if others saw our calm confidence in the Lord Jesus shining through no matter what: *"Let your gentleness be evident to all"* (Philippians 4:5).

The best way to put our trust in Jesus is to pray to Him who really is Lord: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:6-7).

2. God's Design for Marriage is Good

a. Living Out God's Good Design

Another concern the plebiscite might raise for Christians is this: "Is God's design of man/woman marriage actually good?" Many people in our society are arguing for a change; what's so special about God's design that we should keep living it out?

The first thing to say is that - as Jesus taught when questioned about divorce - marriage is not ours to change, it is the creation of our Creator: *"At the beginning the Creator "made them male and female"* (Matthew 19:4, quoting Genesis 1:27). God has declared His

commitment to His creation despite the impact of sin, supremely through the resurrection of His Son Jesus from the dead. So even if Australia changes its marriage laws, Christians must maintain our own marriage practice. And this is not only what we must do, it is also a wonderful thing to do. Marriage between a man and a woman is a great gift from our Creator, displaying his wisdom and generosity to us, his creatures. That God designed marriage as needing both a man and a woman highlights the equal necessity of both men and women. Both are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27-28) and neither can bring into the world a new life without the other (Genesis 2:18-25, 3:20). Also, in God's design of marriage, children come into the world already gifted a family context of loving commitment between their parents, both of whom they have a special bond with through their biological connection. Therefore, our continued commitment to man/woman marriage today points to the beauty of our Creator's good design for humanity and so brings glory to Him.

Of course, no marriage is perfect, including Christian marriages. Since humanity's original rejection of God, marriage is one of many good gifts corrupted by sin (Genesis 3:16). Yet Christian marriage also points to the even greater gift of Jesus in saving his people from sin. The intimate unity-in-difference between a man and a woman in Christian marriage points to the intimate unity-in-difference between Jesus and his people (Ephesians 5:31-32). A Christian wife will submit to her husband as the church submits to Jesus (Ephesians 5:24). Yet the authority of her husband to which she submits must never resemble that typically seen in the world (Mark 10:42-45). It must always be modelled on that of Jesus himself i.e. self-sacrificing instead of self-serving: "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*" (Ephesians 5:25). When Christian couples display this complementary other-centredness, it displays to the world the beautiful relationship between Jesus and his people, the radical difference that Jesus makes, and the goodness of his salvation. So, no matter how marriage in our country might change, Christian marriage must keep displaying this complementary other-centeredness, if anything more profoundly than ever.

b. Upholding God's Good Design in Our Community

The government has asked the citizens of Australia to participate in a voluntary postal vote on same-sex marriage. Christians like other people are under no compulsion to vote and have the right to vote or abstain as they see fit, however the GiST team is encouraging Christians to have their say by voting 'no' and also considering carefully how to speak to others about their vote in a way that adorns the gospel. In order to assist with that thinking, the following evaluation of some of the arguments is offered.

Many think Christians should vote 'no' in this plebiscite because we're being asked by our government for our opinion on what marriage *is*. Marriage is not ours to change: God defines what marriage *is*, not people. However we must go further than this, and say that neither does the state *make* particular marriages. It is God who joins two people together in marriage, not the state (Matthew 19:6).

If God makes particular marriages, what then is the role of the state in marriage? The role of the state is to *recognise* particular marriages. If your relationship meets the definition in the *Marriage Act* (and you've filled out the paperwork correctly!) the state recognises your

marriage. This then qualifies your relationship for certain privileges that the state bestows.¹ This is the state's way of honouring marriage, because it recognises that marriage is an institution which is a practical good in our society.

However, the marriage law does more than just honour marriage practically; it also functions to hold out to society an ideal for intimate relationships. That is, the state's positive public affirmation of marriage makes it clear to everyone that the state considers the marriage relationship to be highly desirable, in fact, more desirable than other kinds of intimate relationships (in part because, generally speaking, it provides the best context for raising children). This is one of the key reasons why same-sex couples want the marriage law changed: so that the state then makes it clear to everyone that same-sex intimate relationships are just as desirable and worthy of honour as opposite sex intimate relationships. However, Christians are unable to affirm the desirability of same-sex intimate relationships in light of the clear biblical teaching that homosexual practice is sinful (e.g. Romans 1:26-27).

How then should Christians seek to influence the laws of the state in this area? In terms of voting the answer to this seems relatively straightforward. Since we're being asked by the state what in our view would be best for our society, and seeing as God's good design for marriage is best not just for Christians but for all people and for our society generally; we are encouraging Christians to vote 'no' in this plebiscite.

However even more important than the marriage law is the estrangement of our society from its Creator which gives rise to sinful behaviours such as the pursuit of same-sex relationships. In that case arguing for a return to faith in Jesus must feature prominently in our speech about marriage, or we will not be addressing the fundamental issue.

The Apostle Paul provides a wonderful example of this. When hauled before the public authorities on charges of stirring up trouble Paul repeatedly brings his defence back to the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 23:6, 24:15&21,26:6-8) so that he might have an opportunity to speak the gospel (Acts 24:24,26:9-23). This is why GiST's approach has always been to seek to bring the gospel to bear in each situation, because it is only the gospel which truly causes people to *want* God's good design in all areas of their lives, including marriage, and be able to pursue that good effectively through the power of the Holy Spirit. Arguments from nature and the common good have value, but their value is limited because it is only through the death and resurrection of Jesus that any of us can become righteous in God's eyes.

Ultimately if we want to see our society return wholeheartedly to God's design for marriage, we need people to embrace God's solution to the sin which has led society away from it.

c. How Then Should We Speak on This Issue?

We should speak on this issue graciously, gently and without fear, in a way which points people to our hope in the gospel (1 Peter 3:15, Colossians 4:6, 2 Timothy 1:7). These are complex questions and we cannot address every aspect of them here. However, here are

¹ Most of the privileges the state bestows on married couples are now bestowed also on other kinds of relationships, such as de-facto marriages and civil partnerships, both of which are available to same-sex couples. In fact, one of the only privileges still reserved for married couples is the title 'marriage'.

some key suggestions for how to respond to common objections about Christians voting 'no'.

Q. Aren't you being unloving?

Christians affirm wholeheartedly that in relating to anyone in our society our goal should be to love them. After all, it was Jesus who affirmed that "Love your neighbour as yourself" is one of the great command of the Bible (Matthew 22:39). However does loving someone mean affirming everything that they wish to do? No it doesn't. You can love someone and disagree with them; in fact loving someone sometimes demands that you disagree with them.

The way Christians seek to love is shaped by Jesus. As God, Jesus became a man to 'get down beside us'. He didn't shy away from experiencing the hard things in life. At our best, Christians therefore seek to get beside people and love them even if that means hardship.

But Jesus also loved people by telling them about God's best way to live: their need to trust him as God's Messiah and live his way. This is one of the things that got him crucified, as the religious authorities who violently disagreed with Jesus' views sought to silence him forever. The point is, Jesus loved people by seeking their good not affirming everything they wished to do, even to his own hurt and death.

It is this kind of love which has inspired so many people to follow Jesus since, and shapes the way Christians seek to love. On this basis, we see voting 'no' in the postal vote as an expression of love for our society by wanting what's best for it according to God's good design for marriage.

Q. Aren't you denying gay people their rights?

Christians believe that all people are made in the image of God and so are equally valuable. In fact, this is the basis of our western notion of human rights. Christians are therefore the last people who would wish to deny others their rights, or to suggest that gay people are somehow 'second class' citizens.

Nevertheless, Christians do not see marriage in terms of rights but as a special type of relationship given privileged status by the state as an affirmation of its uniqueness and suitability among all other human relationships for intimacy and the raising of children. Gay people already have the right to have their committed, monogamous relationships recognised by the state, through civil unions.

It appears that what some gay people seek from the marriage law is not rights but *affirmation* of their relationships. Which leads to the question, "Is there a better source from which to seek affirmation than from the state?" Christians believe that there is, and encourage all people to seek their affirmation in the work of Jesus at the cross. On this basis God affirms all who trust in him.

Q. Aren't you forcing your Christian views on everyone else?

Christians uphold the idea that you can't make someone believe what you want them to believe; that you cannot force (nor should you try to force) someone else to subscribe to

your views on life, and specifically your religious views. In fact, Jesus' crucifixion was agitated for (ultimately successfully) by those who wished to force him to agree with their religious views. And Jesus himself said that he hadn't come to earth to bring about anything like a nation-state as we know it. Rather he came to establish an entirely different type of kingdom that changes people's hearts in the way laws never can, as they respond to all that Jesus has done for them. Hence forcing our views on others is not something Christians would wish to support!

However by voting 'no' Christians are not seeking to force their views on anyone. We are simply seeking to answer the question that's being asked of us: "What do you think would be the best marriage law for our society?" We're seeking to answer that question honestly in line with our vision for human flourishing, just as we would expect everyone else in Australia to answer that question in line with their vision for human flourishing.

To force our views on others would mean seeking to *coerce* others to live the way we want them to – to have punishments put in place in law for those who disagree with us. This is the last thing Christians would want to do and has nothing to do with voting 'no' in this postal vote.

Q. Why is man/woman marriage so important to you Christians?

Marriage is important to us because we believe God designed human relationships in such a way that they point to His love for people. When God originally made man and woman, he made two similar and yet different people and designed them to work together. Gender shows us that we were made for loving, complementary togetherness, not independent aloneness or sameness. More than that, it tells us that God has been on about relationships that reflect the contours of His love from the beginning.

Jesus said that while God's design for relationships between the sexes has been terribly abused and distorted as we have tried to manage relationships our own way, marriage between a man and a woman still points to something much bigger and more magnificent – the gracious, delighting, passionate, faithful, safe, fruitful love of God for rebellious people (Eph 5v31-32). Marriage between a man and a woman is so important to us because it points to the God and Saviour we all desperately need.

3. Both What We Say and How We Say It Are Important

We have an important opportunity over the coming weeks as we speak to those around us on this issue. We need to use this opportunity well, surprising people with our graciousness, opening our homes to those we differ from, being eager to listen and quick to apologise for any rude, self-righteous words fuelled by fear or frustration.

a. The Tone of What We Say

We are to speak graciously towards those with whom we disagree, even when we are spoken to harshly (1 Peter 3:9). In this we are modelling to the world the character of our Saviour (1 Peter 2:23), who taught us to love not just our friends but everyone (Matthew 5:44-47).

b. Clear Communication

Part of our difficulty in speaking about this issue is that often the message we send is not the message that is received, because of the world-view of our hearers. Sexuality for many people in our society (and not just for gay people) has become so fundamental to their identity, and hence fundamental to their humanity, that they hear us to be calling into question their dignity as human beings. We need to be very clear, therefore, that we – and indeed the Bible – affirm the full humanity of gay people, who share the image of God with us. We also have the opportunity to speak about finding our identity in Christ rather than in our sexuality.

c. Speaking As We Would Have Others Speak To Us

Many Christians are concerned that should the plebiscite result be “yes” then their freedoms in the future to speak and act in line with their conscience in this area of life will be curtailed. If the plebiscite result is “yes” then increasing pressure on those who disagree with same-sex marriage seems likely. Christians in Australia in the future may well find themselves as people in the minority, seeking space in our society so that we can faithfully live out the implications of our faith, just like the early church (c.f. 1Timothy 2:1-2). It is, therefore, good for us to be actively upholding the rights of all those who may have their freedoms curtailed through future political changes. It is also important for us to speak with the respect that we would love others to show us in the future (Matthew 7:12).

Conclusion

While we encourage all Christians to take the plebiscite very seriously, we also need to remember that our primary aim as Christ’s church is not to win this plebiscite but to glorify God and hold out the news of the gospel. This is a great time to ask non-Christian friends, including gay friends, about their stories: how they think life works best and what they hope in; and arising from that to share with them the gospel which lies at the heart of our own worldview and offers eternal hope to our broken world.