



Sermon: Rev Dr Clive Pearson

The Complexity of Understanding Marriage, the Bible and the Church

Part 1

It's hard to imagine. Back in 1977 the Uniting Church came into being in a service of worship at the Town Hall here in Sydney. It was a time of promise and hope, a time of celebration and would lead one of our former Presidents, some years later, Andrew Dutney, to write a book with a title: *Where Did the Joy Come From?* Way back then it was hard to imagine that the issue of same gender relationships (as we now call them) would become one of the most hotly debated issues in the church – indeed, one of the most divisive.

Over a period of about 3 decades how our church has engaged with this core concern has evolved. Once the focus was on leadership and ordination. In due course it shifted and did so most markedly when law of the land with regard to marriage changed following a referendum back on 9 August 2017. Over 60% of those who voted did so for an amendment to the law allow two persons of the same sex to marry; it became law in December and on the 15th December the first same gender marriage in this country under these provisions took place. Between 2004 and 2017 there had been 22 unsuccessful bills to the same end.¹

9 months later, on September 21, 2018 the Uniting Church became the first major denomination in this country to offer gay and lesbian Christians the option of a church ceremony. That outcome had been made possible by a decision of the Assembly meeting a few months earlier in July.²

¹ Adam Webster, 'Explainer: How Australia Can Legalise Same-Sex Marriage', *The Conversation*, 2 June 2015. <https://theconversation.com/explainer-how-australia-can-legalise-same-sex-marriage-42604>

² Robyn Whitaker, 'After a Long Struggle, the Uniting Church Becomes the First to Offer Same Sex Marriage', *The Conversation*, 17 September 2018. <https://theconversation.com/after-a-long-struggle-the-uniting-church-becomes-the-first-to-offer-same-sex-marriage-102842>

The decision permits those being married in the UCA to choose between two authorized marriage liturgies - one that continues to use the traditional language of “husband and wife” and one that speaks of the union of “two people” and is therefore open to same-sex couples.

The decision allows a member of the clergy to exercise individual freedom of conscience. Ministers will not be compelled to marry a same-sex couple if it goes against their personal understanding of marriage. They may do so if they wish. And likewise congregations have the right to decide for themselves whether they will allow their buildings, their facilities, their churches to be used for same-sex marriages or not. The decision is yours. No other body in the church – no assembly, synod, presbytery - can compel you to do so against your will. And your minister cannot perform a same gender marriage in your church if you have voted that this cannot be done. They must do so elsewhere.

Now not everyone who attended that Assembly agreed with this decision. I would spend some considerable time with one of our ministers who comes from another cultural background and for whom this decision was extremely painful. His congregational ministry has been one of the best in this synod – but on biblical and cultural grounds, he disagreed and felt ambushed,³ though it is fair to say, in preparation for this debate, the Assembly had produced a document of over 80 pages in advance addressing a variety of concerns.⁴

Let me be honest. I thought this report was too long, too complicated for someone whose first language was not English. It was not as sensitive as it could/should have been in that regard – but that was not the burden of my advice to my former student. He was very upset but I reminded him that he did not have to officiate at such a service, and the congregation could decide for itself what it would like to do.

I reminded him of the quality and extent of his ministry and asked whether his resignation would imperil the life and witness of the congregation and its relationship to the neighbourhood. He is still in that placement, the congregation is thriving much more than most, but it was a close call. This decision was not easy for many cultures and for indigenous peoples.

³ For many non-western cultures matters to do with sexuality are never discussed in public. For some the discussions conducted in the Uniting Church were shameful. The Assembly sought to engage with diverse cultures on these matters through sessions at the national conferences of particular ethnic groups. The opposition expressed by my friend was made on several grounds: i). culture; ii) a conservative reading of Scripture; iii), a sense of the holy; iv). recognition of how the church's decisions would be perceived by other churches; and v). the feeling that the relevant Assembly meeting had been 'stacked; by those in favour of allowing same gender marriage.

⁴ UCA Assembly, B23 Assembly Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same Gender Relationships', <https://www.frankstonuniting.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/B23-Standing-Committee-Report-on-Marriage-and-Same-Gender-Relationships.pdf>

Now this decision by the Assembly did not come out of nowhere. There is a long pre-history. Some of that is peculiar to the Uniting Church. Throughout the 1980s and 90s the Assembly actively encouraged conversations about sexuality and theology. It did so mindful of changing times. The Assembly produced Bible studies and other resources for congregations with which you may have engaged.

The most notable of these resources was a 1997 report on *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*.⁵ With the benefit of hindsight I think it tried to deal with too many matters at the same time – and yes, it was long (71 pages) and complicated. For some time after its release the focus fell on ordination and leadership, but this report, the 1997 report, had actually proposed that liturgies, orders of service should be developed for the sake of offering, not marriage, but a blessing to same sex couples.

The 2018 decision did not emerge out of a vacuum then. It had been part and parcel of a series of related discussion over several decades within the church, but sharpened by a change in the law and an assumption that sooner, rather than a later, a minister, a church would be asked to celebrate a same-sex marriage.

That is our history – and it continues to unfold. Now same gender marriage services have been celebrated in the Uniting Church in every synod.⁶ Now proposals have also been affirmed that seek to ‘honour and welcome the life of faith of transgender, intersex and gender diverse in our church.’⁷

The Uniting Church does not exist in glorious isolation from the rest of the Christian tradition(s). Over four months this year I led a 4 part series on a Saturday morning, on ‘The past for Today’. We looked at the way in which the past has fashioned our understanding of what it means to be Christian in thought and deed today. Next year one of the four themes, I suspect, should be the Christian history of sex, marriage, celibacy.

For many years Diarmaid MacCulloch was the Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford university. In January of this year he published his latest book, *Lower than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity*. It is not a particularly as straightforward a task as might be imagined. And this book is long and it is complicated, because our history is that – complicated in these matters. We find ourselves on this side of a

⁵ UCA Assembly, *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*, <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/491?keywords=Uniting+Church+National+History+Society+Conference+2019&highlights=eylwIjoiY2h1cmNoLCIsIjEiOiJ1bml0aW5nIiwil6ImNodXJjaCIsIjMiOiJjaHVyY2g6IiwilNCI6ImNodXJjaFh1MjAxOXMiLCI1Ijoic29jaWV0eS4iLCI2IjoiaGlzdG9yeSIsIjExIjoiY2h1cmNoOjE3IiwilMTUiOiJjaHVyY2guliwiMTciOiJzb2NpZXR5LCIsIjlyIjoiY2h1cmNoLlx1MjAxOSIsIjMwIjoiaGlzdG9yeSwifQ%3D%3D>

⁶ Warren Talbot, ‘Thirty Years of Daring to Hope’, 14 August 2024. <https://uniting.church/30-years-of-daring-to-hope/>

⁷ UCA Assembly, 15 July 2024. <https://uniting.church/affirming-gender-diverse-people/>

revolutionary understanding of sexuality and relationships compared with centuries prior to the 1960s.⁸

Some of the language that is used now is relatively modern. Who remembers the first time they said ‘same gender’ or ‘same sex’? The words homosexuality and heterosexuality did not exist until 1869 – and both words initially had negative, pathological associations – and, believe it or not, being heterosexual was deemed to be the worse of the two because it signified too much appreciation of the opposite sex.⁹

Now it is true that the weight of the Christian tradition has been hostile to same sex relationships. It has been standard practice to regard such as a sin. It stands inside a much wider nervousness that the Christian faith has tended to display towards sexual matters. Some years ago now an historian by the name of James Brundage examined the medieval penitentials of the church – that is when that individual made his or her way into the confessional box and informed the priest of their sins.¹⁰

These penitentials – that is, what the priest was supposed to say in response, were never brought into a system, but Brundage drew up a diagram which showed the overwhelming majority had to do with sexual matters and, that if the advice was rigorously followed, sex was only possible on Thursday

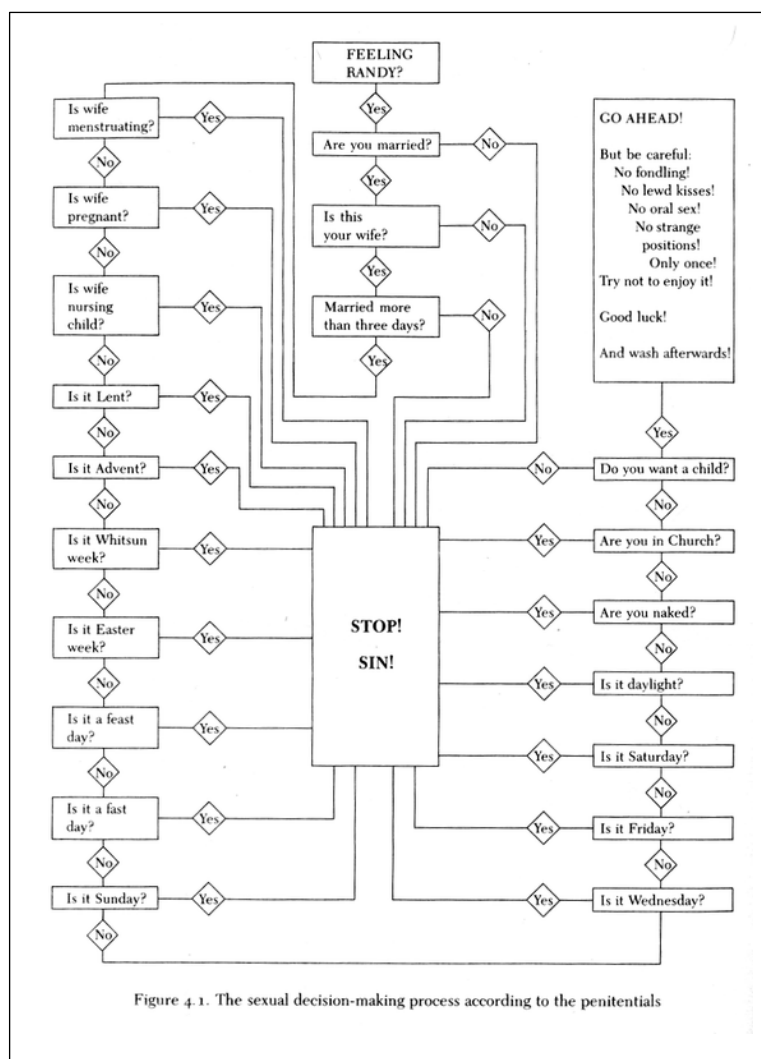


Figure 4.1. The sexual decision-making process according to the penitentials

⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Lower than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity*, (London: Allen Lane / Penguin, 2024). For a review, see: Catherine Larnier, 20 September 2024, <https://uniting.church/affirming-gender-diverse-people/> For a presentation MacCulloch made on this book held in St Paul's Cathedral, London: see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ea7jGn_dKEo

⁹ Oliver Tearle, 'The Curious Origin of the Word 'Homosexual'', <https://interestingliterature.com/2023/09/homosexual-word-origin/> ; Brendan Ambrosino, 'The Invention of "Heterosexuality"', BBC, 16 March 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170315-the-invention-of-heterosexuality>

¹⁰ James Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, (Chicago: University of University Press, 1990).

night, so long as it was not a holy day, and you kept your clothes on – to which one my students lamented that was the night she did her shopping.

Part 2: Some Issues

That diagram that drew up with regards the medieval penitentials begs a question: why has the church focussed so much of its energy and time on matters do with sex at the expense of economic injustice, greed, avarice, inequalities of all sorts. A close reading of the church's history also reveals the prejudice and damage done to those who have found themselves in love with someone of their own gender. Whatever decision is reached on same gender marriage there is always a need for lament that has been done in the church's name to such.¹¹

The debates that have arisen in the church world-wide to do with same sex relationships is not surprising, nevertheless. The problem, if we can use that word here, lies in their capacity to become what a pair of relatively conservative English Christians, Mark Bonnington and Robert Fyall, called 'this big little issue'. They were not yet thinking about same gender marriage or civil unions; they were thinking about relationships in general, and leadership within the church.¹²

What they had recognized is that this focus on same gender relationships raises a host of other matters: what does it mean to be human, to be made in the image of God? What does it mean to be male and female? What is sin? What is grace? And what is the purpose of marriage, friendship, partnership? What does it then mean for us to follow Jesus and be the people of God, a fellowship of the Spirit, the body of Christ?

To which we might add how are we to read the Bible and its mix of messages on an issue that belongs so much to our century, to cultures like ours, but upon which the Scriptures themselves did not address head on? It so happens that the Uniting Church is committed to the need to interpret these ancient scriptures to the best of our ability, knowing that they came to us from cultures very different from ours. (This paragraph in the *Basis of Union* is critical inasmuch as it

¹¹ For the 'History of Christianity and Homosexuality', see Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Christianity_and_homosexuality
Fabrizio Mussachio, 'Homosexuality in Christian history: Persecution and moral condemnation', https://www.fabriziomusacchio.com/weekend_stories/told/2025/2025-01-18-homosexuality_in_christian_history/

¹² Mark Bonnington and Robert Fyall, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1996).

emphasizes the right and need to interpret scriptural texts that many might accept at 'face value' as being relevant and the Word of God for today).¹³

Now that is not to say that the Bible is entirely silent on matters of a male lying with another male, for instance: there are a handful of texts, not many in the Bible, (between 6 to 8 passages) that refer to such¹⁴ but they are minuscule in the total number of verses in Scriptures – 31,102.

How are we to read those passages like that in Leviticus where such behaviour is regarded as an abomination, worthy of being put to death. But, before you throw the first stone, there is uncertainty as to what that reference might mean. Is it what we think or does it refer to some sort of idolatrous ritual – in other words, a temple prostitution and the corruption of worship. The jury is out: we do not know. We were not there.¹⁵

To which someone might then reply: how many of you have ever been angry with your parents? How many of you like a nice piece of bacon or a pork chop with your apple sauce; how many of you are wearing clothes, the latest fashions, made of mixed fibres? For all these come under the same sentence, except for the apple sauce.

Let's now close in more particularly on why a good number of people would have difficulty with same sex marriage and do so on a mix of biblical and theological grounds. We will look at why others might seek out such a service and be glad that their friends and family came along to a local church for that purpose in part 3.

One of the most measured accounts of the pros and cons of same gender marriage and the church came from another one of my former students.¹⁶ I know that he is opposed, though with the passage of years his position has softened and he has

¹³ The Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* declares:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word. In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith. The Uniting Church lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship the Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission. The Uniting Church thanks God for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr. It prays that it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds. (Paragraph 11)

¹⁴ For example, Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

¹⁵ The Leviticus texts are especially subject to much critical interest. There are those for whom these texts do mean that same sex activity is prohibited; for an alternative reading, see David Mercier: <https://davidkmercier.com/leviticus-18-homosexuality-abominations/>

¹⁶ Michael Earl, 'Theology and the Nature of Marriage', *Insights*, 11 May 2018. <https://www.insights.uca.org.au/theology-and-the-nature-of-marriage/>

sometimes said 'I could be wrong' But he knows well where he stands and why. He is also one of our best ministers and done a hugely successful ministry of repair.

There are those handful of passages (mainly found in the Old Testament, but also in Paul's epistle to the Romans); there is also the saying of Jesus in response to a question put to those trying to trap him on the business of divorce: 'For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and will live with his wife. The two will become one.' So they are no longer two but one. Let no man divide what God has put together."

But the tenor of those passages is not the fundamental grounds for objection because this former student of mine knows that they interpreted in the context of their own time before they engage with our here and now. In this instance he noted first areas of agreement across the divide: marriage is between two people only – polygamy is not acceptable; commitment, love, faithfulness, respect, dignity, grace offered and received characterize the marriage relationship; they reflect the love and grace of God;

marriage is for the mutual building up of one another in love and the deepening of the relationship over time; marriage is a lifelong commitment; though it is not in our tradition a formal sacrament it nevertheless carries meaning as an outward sign of the universal will and love of God; any form of promiscuity, disrespect, abuse, unfaithfulness, coercion or predatory behaviour has no place in a Christian understanding of marriage / sexuality. Partners are of equal status.

Those points of agreement were then followed by what he called the traditional perspective: he included those 6 texts to do with sexual activity that was an abomination, but did so mindful they come t us from another time, another culture.

This friend then noted that the traditional view of marriage, between a man and a woman, was the norm in churches today; the UCA is only one of a small number of churches that will celebrate same sex marriages with a liturgy in a church. The traditional pattern is exactly that: it has been the practice of the church over time. And then two other arguments were added: the first is what is called the argument of the 'orders of creation': in Genesis 1 we hear that God created male and female; and this argument is then supported by the argument of complementarity – that is, our biological design complements the other gender – for the sake of the procreation of children and the ensuing family life with a mother and father. One thing he did not include was how, in some cultures, the church building itself is regarded as holy, sacred, tapu.

This is the overall position this former student of mine prefers, but ... but he demonstrated a generosity of spirit, and also outlined the case for the point of view that was not his.

Part 3

Over the years I have led many workshops, studies on same gender relationships, including one on marriage for this presbytery. I have listened to students for ministry wrestle with their coming out; I have set up congregational research groups which met every Friday afternoon for 3 months and which included in the team those who were gay, parents whose daughter was gay but who said this was one issue they could not talk about in church, through to an older man whose starting position was that same gender activity was an abomination. But I have never officiated at the marriage of two people of the same gender;

I have never been asked to do so which led me to reflect on why a couple like this might prefer a church wedding. And so, first off, I read a survey of responses from the US of same gender couples who got married – and then reflected on the authorized marriage services.¹⁷

For those in the survey they reflected on the journey they had made which was sometimes punctuated by bouts of worry and anxiety as to what family; wondering what members of the church might think, but when it came to the **time of their** service they felt like they had worked through what it meant to be faithful to one another, sometimes in very testing times, how much it meant for them to have a service in a church surrounded by the warmth of friends and family – and how this spoke to them of the breaking in of the radical love of God. For the service to happen in church, for promises to be made not just to one another, but in the sight, in the presence of God meant much, so much, sometimes much more than heterosexual couples who want a church wedding.

Those who are gay, those who are lesbian, are of course well aware of the biblical texts which are sometimes used against them: for some they are like texts of terror whereas others have said that one needs to engage with them – and sometimes note that the bible expressed an acceptance of slavery and the submission of women in ways that we may now have left behind.

Some reflect for themselves on which biblical texts and traditions speak to them, inspire them, keep them faithful in the life of faith, and provide hope. Quite often those biblical references are those expressed by people on the margins of Jesus' ministry – like the blind man Bartimaeus in the gospel of Mark who cries out to Jesus to pay heed to him, even while the disciples try to exclude him.

¹⁷ Bridget Burke Ravizza, *The Sacrament of Same-Sex Marriage: An Inclusive Vision for the Catholic Church*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 2024). For a review, see: <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2024/06/21/review-of-bridget-burke-ravizzas-the-sacrament-of-same-sex-marriage-an-inclusive-vision-for-the-catholic-church/> and: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/956544>

All of which brings us to the marriage service. ¹⁸It might begin with the lighting of the Christ candle, followed by an acknowledgement of why we gather in the presence of God, an extension of the grace of the three-fold God to those present. There may be an opening sentence like 1 John 4:16: God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

There may then be a prayer that acknowledges the generous love of God, the gift of marriage and how the couple concerned might grow in love so that it may be a true reflection of God's love for all. It then proceeds onto the declaration of purpose which reflects the changes in the law and also the decision of the relevant Assembly: it reads

Marriage is a gift of God
and a means of grace.
In the life-long union of marriage
we can know the joy of God,
in whose image we are made.

Marriage is founded in God's loving nature,
and in the covenant of love made with us in Christ.
Two people, in giving themselves to each other in love,
reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In Christian marriage, couples are called
to live together faithfully, and to love each other with respect,
tenderness and delight.
The companionship and comfort of marriage
enables the full expression of physical love.

They share the life of a home and may be entrusted with the
gift and care of children.
They help to shape a society in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and
abound.
Marriage is a way of life that all people should honour;
it is not to be entered into lightly or selfishly,
but responsibly and in the love of God.

The declaration of purpose is followed by readings from Scripture, a sermon, leading
to a declaration of intent where the couple separately express their belief that their
lives have been guided and blessed by God, and that they will love, honour, protect,

¹⁸ For commentary, see John Squires, 'The "Additional Marriage Liturgy" for Uniting Churches', *An Informed Faith*, <https://johnsquires.com/2018/08/30/the-additional-marriage-liturgy-which-allows-same-gender-couples-to-marry-in-uniting-churches/>

comfort the other and forsaking all others. The service may include a prayer to do with the raising of children.

The families may be asked for their blessing and willingness to support the couple; the vows are made the rings exchanged with a repeated emphasis on being in the presence of God. The marriage is blessed invoking Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the marriage certificates are signed, and prayers offered for the future.

The wedding service does not seek to engage with the case against – it does not set out the challenge the principle of complementarity or the order of creation. It does not do that because the service itself is not the right space for it, and, more often than not, couples have already wrestled with those kind of questions.

So what are we to say? much depends upon how you understand God, how you understand Christ, how you understand what is the gospel. The fact of the matter is that the Bible does not address the business of same gender marriage directly. It is a 21st century matter.

At the very least this newness means that we should travel gently and with grace, as we think through whether the church can be used for same gender marriages. We can so easily walk roughly over the lives of others. We do not seek so much to proclaim our own opinion which may have been formed in all manner of ways; our perspectives are often based on how we ourselves were brought up, the time in which we raised, the people we have known, the cultural assumptions of the day.

In this case we might need to take a step back from the instinctive habits of the heart and seek to listen for the gospel, to bear witness to that gospel as it breaks in upon us and is made known to us in and through the presence of God.¹⁹

Clive Pearson, October 2025.

¹⁹ The doctrinal issues involved in same gender marriage were explored by a working group in the following document; 'Task Group on the Theology of Marriage and Public Covenants for Same-Gender Relationships within the Uniting Church

<https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au > assets > download > 1368>