

MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM

Bishops' Letter on Marriage The Mission Province 2009

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Introduction

In our land, as in many others, a political process is under way to change the law concerning marriage to encompass also homosexual partnerships. The agenda of the moment is “gender-neutral” marriage. In this connection, the Church of Sweden is considering whether it should participate by also offering a church wedding to those who wish to enter such a partnership.

What is happening is part of a distancing of society and culture from the Christian foundation on which European society is built. This is also an indication that ideological fashions are becoming more important than realities. Proven traditions are being abandoned for the demands of the spirit of the age.

This issue disturbs us Christians. Marriage between man and woman is so well anchored in biblical theology and ecclesiastic tradition that a broadening of the concept is not possible. A majority of Christian churches and denominations have therefore dissociated themselves from the political development on this issue. Many of them have said that they do not intend to seek the legal right to perform marriages under the new law. They will not contribute to something that could be perceived as approving of an altered law concerning marriage.

Otherwise, however, the bishops and leadership of the Church of Sweden have not raised objections to the proposed changes in the marriage law. Quite the contrary, in widely noticed cases they have expressed their satisfaction. Positions held until now, sometimes only a few years old, have been abandoned for what has become politically correct.

When the Church of Sweden's General Synod decided in 2005 to offer blessings for partnerships, Bishop Walter Obare Omwanza of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya was visiting our country. In response to this decision, he issued a press release that stated in part:

Our visit has coincided with the sitting of the Assembly [General Synod] of the Church of Sweden, which finally has decided for same sex blessing in the Church, against the clear testimony of the Word of God. The Church of Sweden, which for a long time was held to be a pillar for the reformation and confessional position in Lutheranism, has now proved beyond reasonable doubt that it is no longer a Church Body, but a human rights movement in the world. Further, the Church of Sweden has put aside the Authority of the Church (the Bible) and instead turned to human rationale in the name of democracy.

It is our experience that significant portions of the Church of Sweden's people share this judgment. They should not lack representatives for their faith and conviction within the tradition of the Church of Sweden. Therefore we bishops within the Mission Province in Sweden wish to summarize the Church's view of marriage. At the same time we present some responses to the current political situation.

+Arne Olsson

+Lars Artman

+Göran Beijer

... man and woman

A person is either a man or a woman. We can all see that this is the shape of reality. All higher forms of life take the form of two sexes.¹ It is through their cooperation that life can continue. Therefore sexuality is also a strong drive, like the need to satisfy hunger and thirst and to rest.

The relationship between the two sexes varies from species to species. The popular nature programs on TV and radio give innumerable examples of this. For humans the relationship of a couple is obviously advantageous. A woman can give birth to comparatively few children, and needs someone to protect them during their long childhood. The man knows which children are his, so that he can especially protect them. Various forms of families have been and still are known among various cultures. But the fixed relationship between one man and one woman has shown itself best suited for the security that the life and survival of the family requires. This is not changed, even by the fact that our modern society offers supplementary care.

The love between man and woman involves feelings that are not simply connected to procreation and care of offspring. It is clear that the purpose of love is to strengthen a couple's relationship. The man and the woman have more in common than a sex drive and their children. They value one another as individuals. When they wish to hold together in their love, it strengthens the whole family. Life is clearly formed as togetherness.

Love and sexuality strengthen and deepen each other. When the emotional affinity is joined with the inclination and desire to enrich the togetherness with children, life is propagated. A portion of humanity, of unclear size, is instead seized by feelings for someone of the same sex. This, however, cannot lead to love to the same extent as between man and woman. A homosexual relationship is unavoidably unfruitful. It cannot lead to the formation of new life. However homosexuals' feelings are valued, it can be confirmed that they lead life to a dead end.

... clearly perceived in the things he made

Whether a person is a man or a woman is clearly obvious. The difference is ordinarily perceived immediately. One needs no external distinguishing features, such as body language or clothing, to see this. Even in the case of similar fashions for men and women, without hearing the voice, one seldom mistakes this. Little features and body proportions also make clear whether the person is a man or a woman.

It is in this clear reality that the interplay between male and female takes shape in society. The human experience has shown that it is best for all if there are rules regarding the meeting of man and woman. It has especially been beneficial to protect and support the association and union between them. That this has been abused to dominate the woman or force the couple into rigid conventions does not change the insight that regulations in harmony with the shape of reality are best both for the individual and the relationship.

Thus the family appears, with father, mother and children, from the earliest time as the cornerstone of society. Although the family has had varying forms, monogamous marriage has been the prevailing basis in the context in which our modern European society has its cultural roots. Antiquity is not separated in this regard from biblical culture, for polygamy was abandoned before the New Testament era. While Germanic society had a different form for entering into marriage than the Christian, even there monogamy was the norm.

What distinguishes marriage from other forms of cohabitation, and which therefore characterizes the law, is that it encompasses three parties: man, woman and child. It is not just a contract between two adults. The fact that not all couples have children does not change this basic form. Therefore laws have also been found in the various cultures about how a marriage is dissolved. Concern for children, which is also in society's interest, has meant that parents are not permitted to leave one another arbitrarily.

Society's interest in stabilizing families is based to a significant extent on the insight that children are raised and develop best in families. They have good opportunities to find their identities with both a father and a mother. Both the individual and society benefit from well functioning families. Therefore it has been an important political objective to give the family protection and support. This has also been set forth in a series of international conventions.²

... they are without excuse

A society that does not take into consideration the reality that there are differences between men and women will have problems. The modern notion that gender is simply a social construction ignores the physical reality. To purport that a woman is like a man, with the difference that she can give birth to children, stems from a vain attempt to place ideology before obvious facts. The woman's body in its entirety, and therefore also her psyche, is thoroughly characterized by her ability to carry a fetus for nine months and feed the child afterwards.

Marriage is the union between a man, who can beget, and a woman, who can give birth to children. If a couple cannot have children, their marriage still remains within this form. But if marriage is decoupled in principle from this form, it becomes something else. Homosexual partnership does not fit into this pattern. Because this relationship is unfruitful, it lacks the third part, children, that belongs to marriage in the form we have received it as a cultural and Christian inheritance. If children are to become possible in a homosexual relationship, a fourth part is needed, a man or a woman. It is precisely this fourth part that marriage wishes to keep outside the family.

Gender-neutral marriage is by no means an obvious development in Western culture. In France a recent official report established that marriage is designed to be able to receive and care for children. Marriage between a man and a woman is best for the child, and therefore also most beneficial for the child's identity formation. There is a need, the report deems, to give homosexual partnership a full legal form in a modern society. But because the conditions are different, partnerships call for a different legal treatment, and this cannot be viewed as discriminatory.³

Nor is making marriage and partnership equal in accordance with decisions in the European Court.⁴ In the USA a number of states have laws protecting traditional marriage, some of these adopted recently by referendum.

History shows that a radical break with well-founded cultural traditions seldom brings good results. If anything, one can see the pattern that when a functioning order is abandoned, it leads to cultural collapse. Those who contemplate breaking with our society's firm tradition of marriage, with its deep roots, assume great responsibility. The judgment of history can be severe.

We therefore find it extraordinarily troubling that so many decision-makers and opinion-shapers submit to a current trend. They lose the confidence of many. People understand clearly that there is a reality that cannot be changed by a political decision. Here as elsewhere it is true that one must follow reality rather than ideology, if what seems politically appropriate at the moment proves to be a wrong track. The secular state can have its reasons for giving homosexuals full legal rights for their partnerships. But this should not be mixed up with a marriage between a man and a woman, with its possibility of having and raising children. Whatever opposes nature always loses in the long run.

... this mystery is profound

The reality of man and woman, of love and sexuality, that leads to the family as the foundation for human society, has not developed by accident. It shows what God intends for people and their lives. He has established marriage as the form for the relationship between man and woman.

This is what is revealed in God's Word. From the beginning God created the rule that "a man leaves his father and mother to live with his wife, and they become one."⁵ In the wedding ceremony, the Church has

been able to describe marriage as “a holy union instituted by God.” Paul says that this is a divine “mystery.” He describes in the Epistle to the Ephesians the way in which marriage reflects Christ’s love for the Church,⁶ which in other places in the Word is also called “the bride.”⁷

A consequence of all this is that marriage is in principle indissoluble.⁸ Just as Christ never fails the Church or the believers, partners in a marriage should not fail one another. They are to “love” one another, which is much more than “like.” It means to hold together even in adversity. Love in this divine sense means not simply to receive, but even to be prepared to sacrifice when necessary.⁹ That a marriage can break apart, like everything else in a torn world, does not change this basic prerequisite.

The Church knows nothing other than monogamous marriage. The possibility for a man to have several wives, which appears in the Old Testament, had already fallen out of use by Jesus’ time. If God allowed this for a time, it was not his deeper will. Monogamy was also the norm in the ancient non-Christian milieu in which the Church took form.

The Church has also defended the parties’ right to choose whom to marry. This was in conflict with Germanic culture. In this culture the betrothal was seen as determining when a marriage should be entered into, but this was often based on an agreement between the families. The Church demanded that the wedding, in which the parties themselves gave their consent, should constitute the marriage.

In order to give Christian marriage, with the responsibility the parties undertake, a firm basis, the parties pledge “faithfulness until death do us part.” The marriage law requires only that they publicly acknowledge their consent. Through this promise, marriage becomes something other than a contract about living together, a contract that either party should be able to break. In the more difficult times, which do not come so infrequently, man and wife can remind each other that they rely on each others’ pledge once given.

With all this, marriage becomes an ordinance for the protection of the weaker. It applies to children during their relatively long childhood, when they cannot provide for themselves. It has for long ages applied to the woman, and continues to do so in certain cultural contexts. But also if one of the parties becomes sick or injured, marriage gives security. It is instituted according to God’s will to give people a framework in which sacrificial love rather than selfishness prevails.

... driven and tossed by the wind

Marriage is the framework for love, emotional and sexual, between man and woman. In a damaged existence, however, not even this part of reality is undisturbed. Some are seized by love for people of their own sex. There are divided opinions as to the cause of this orientation. It is obvious, however, that their lives are inevitably different from the majority’s.

Homosexuals are part of the Church’s fellowship. To be “different” is not without problems. They should therefore be given the support they need in their situation. But this does not mean that homosexual practice can be accepted. This is to use the body in a manner for which it was not created. According to the unambiguous witness of the Word, this is something that is opposed to God’s will and intention in His creation.¹⁰

As modern society has distanced itself more and more from Christian norms, an aspiration has developed to make homosexual partnership equal to marriage. Some Christians have been affected by the spirit of the age and demand that the Church should also accept this viewpoint. They have wished to have homosexual relationships blessed in the Church. The Church of Sweden’s General Synod, dominated by members chosen by the political parties, has decided for such blessings. The bishops have contributed to this, which is perhaps not surprising, since they are indirectly chosen politically.

Thus the Church, which Jesus called to be a light in the world,¹¹ has instead become a mirror of society. Every notion that there is a firm Christian tradition concerning marriage, unbroken until our era, is abandoned for whatever the age demands. To conform oneself to an opinion successfully formed by

interest groups becomes more important than being faithful to God's Word and the Christian heritage. Without reflecting more closely on what the Bible and the Confessions may have to say on the issue, the Church adapts to the policy of the day.

Thereby the bishops and leaders of the Church of Sweden have betrayed the prophetic calling that God gives not only to individual Christians, but also to the Church as a whole. In an increasingly secularized society, they should let God's voice be heard. They are not following the Apostolic example to "obey God rather than men."¹²

... your thoughts will be led astray

The Church has always expected of its bishops that they should be "watchmen on Zion's walls."¹³ At their consecration they have promised to "maintain and defend the Church's order." When they now do not intervene to oppose society's changing and perverting what marriage is according to the Christian faith, they betray the duties of their office.

In addition they are breaking the Church of Sweden out of ecumenical fellowship with the worldwide Church. According to the rules of the World Council of Churches, consensus should prevail over taking positions. The Porvoo Declaration is preconditioned on collegial and conciliar consultation among the member churches concerning serious issues of faith and church order, life and service.¹⁴ None of this is being respected. In a devastating manner, the Church of Sweden is sufficient unto itself. Political opinion in Sweden is more important than fellowship among the Christians in other parts of the world.

What has already happened, that the bishops affirm blessings of homosexual partnerships, is problematic enough. What the Church can do is to mediate God's blessings. What God does not bless, the Church cannot bless either. When they affirm something that is not in accord with God's will, the bishops have ceased to be servants of the Lord.

Thus the bishops become no longer shepherds who lead their flock through the confusion of the age. Christians with basic knowledge of what is God's will lose confidence in them, because they no longer recognize God's voice in what they hear. They will abandon their leaders sooner or later, because they will not follow the voices of strangers.¹⁵

In the end, one who leads astray becomes a seducer. What awaits such persons the Lord makes unambiguously clear.¹⁶

We admonish the bishops and others in the leadership of the Church of Sweden to reflect on the position they have taken. They are responsible "with the great day of reckoning before their eyes."¹⁷ Although this expression no longer remains in the Church of Sweden's ordination rite, it applies. More important than the responsibility they seem to think they have regarding current societal development is the responsibility they have before the Lord of the Church.

... a man shall leave his father and mother and live with his wife

We can recommend nothing but the Church maintain the Christian view of marriage which the Church of Sweden received as an inheritance, and which to this day has been the doctrine and order based on God's Word. The Church cannot prevent a secular state from establishing the laws it finds appropriate. She may find herself in the situation that the original Christian term "marriage" has been twisted. But the Church can refuse for her part to conform.

In our firm opinion the Church ought no longer participate in any legal role in the inception of marriage if the new marriage law is adopted. The Church of Sweden should refrain from seeking the legal right to conduct marriages. If this does not happen, we wish to encourage individual pastors to act on their own by refraining from seeking a license to perform marriages.

Even if they proclaim the Christian view of marriage during their wedding services, they cannot escape giving indirect support to the state's understanding of what a marriage should now be considered to be.

Because there is room for a Christian marriage within the planned new law, the law can be allowed to provide an external framework for such a marriage. But the wedding couple ought not involve the church in the procedures of a law that no longer meets Christian requirements. We therefore suggest that they register their marriage at the civil ceremony that is offered. Afterwards they can pledge their promises and have their union blessed in a worship service, which for them becomes the real wedding.

An alternative could be that those who wish to marry circumvent the new law by drawing up and registering a marriage contract thoroughly characterized by Christian faith and tradition. Then this should be the basis for a church ceremony that is in reality a wedding. Such a marriage contract should note what shall happen in circumstances in which the legislation does not have rules that cover everything. This is not uncomplicated, but we wish to encourage faithful Christians to investigate, with assistance of attorneys, the possibilities there are for this and make suggestions as to how such a marriage contract can be structured.

Notes

The section headings in the Bishops' letter are taken from the following Bible passages: Gen. 1:27, Rom. 1:20, Eph. 5:32, James 1:6, 2 Cor. 11:3, Matt. 19:5.

The Mission Province in Sweden

is a part of "the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church." It is a free province of the Church and Congregation of God in Sweden, on the foundation of the unchanged Evangelical-Lutheran Confession. It stands in continuity with the spiritual tradition that has been kept and developed in the Church of Sweden, and regards itself as a non-territorial diocese within it. The Mission Province actively pursues good relations with biblically and confessionally faithful bishops, pastors, deacons, laymen and congregations within the Church of Sweden's official structure. (Excerpt from Section 2 of the Statutes of the Mission Province).

The Mission Province was founded in 2003. It consists of free worshipping fellowships/koinonias, supporting mission organizations and a support association. After being elected, Arne Olsson was consecrated as bishop by Bishop Walter Obare from the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Kenya, assisted by other bishops. Lars Artman and Göran Beijer were consecrated in 2006 as Auxilliary Bishops.

There is further information on the Mission Province website: www.missionsprovinsen.se .

¹ We are aware that some people are born with unclear sexual identity. However, this does not alter the overall reality.

² The UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), Art. 16; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN 1966), Art. 10; The European Social Charter (1961, rev. 1996), Art. 16, etc. See also The Doha Declaration on the family (UN 2004), although the EU has chosen to remain outside this.

³ Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport fait au nom de la mission d'information sur la famille et les droits des enfants*, Rapport No 2831, Tome 1, 25 jan. 2006.

⁴ The European Court has, for example, affirmed the French Supreme Court's reasoning for its decision not to permit a homosexual man to adopt a child: the situation for a homosexual couple is not "analogous" to that for a couple consisting of a man and a woman, from the perspective of possibilities for reproduction (*Fretté v. France*).

⁵ Gen. 2:24, cf. Matt. 19:5, Mark 10:7-8, Eph. 5:31.

⁶ Eph. 5:21-32.

⁷ Rev. 19:7; 21:2,9; cf. Jn. 3:29.

⁸ Matt. 19:6-9, Mark 10:8-12.

⁹ Eph. 5:25, 1 Cor. 13:4-7.

¹⁰ Rom. 1:24-27, 1 Cor. 6:9-10.

¹¹ Matt. 5:14-16.

¹² Acts 4:19-20, 5:29

¹³ Cf. Isa. 62:6.

¹⁴ *Porvoo Common Statement* (1992) b, viii, Chap. V in *Porvoo Agreement Between the Anglican Churches in Great Britain and Ireland and the Lutheran Churches in Nordic and Baltic Countries* (1992).

¹⁵ Jn. 10:5,12-13, cf. Hebr. 13:7

¹⁶ Matt. 18:6-7 and parallels.

¹⁷ Cf. Heb. 13:17, 1 Pet. 5:2-4.