

Unley Park Baptist Church Marriage Affirmation



The upcoming voluntary postal ballot on legalising same-sex marriage has stirred an important and challenging debate across our nation. The leadership of Unley Park Baptist Church believe it best and fair to inform members of our Church's affirmation for the current definition of marriage as between one man and one woman, and that we reject moves to extend the definition to include same sex relationships. We do support the rights of all couples to justice with respect to property and like entitlements and we acknowledge that people, including some in our own church, face issues with respect to sexuality. Yet, we believe recognition of such rights and issues does not justify major changes to our convictions about marriage or to marriage legislation.

Our affirmation is based on our conviction that the Bible, as our primary authority in all matters of faith and conduct, teaches that the only appropriate context for sexual intercourse is between a woman and a man who are married to each other. We acknowledge there are significant social reasons this conviction is also shared by other peoples, not of Christian faith, and that it holds benefit for the whole of society.

Our Church makes this affirmation alongside seventy Baptist churches forming our movement of the Baptist Churches of South Australia; our national movement of 300,000 Baptists in 950 local churches; and with the Baptist World Alliance, representing over 47 million baptised believers and 210 Baptist Unions and Conventions in more than 200 countries.

Same Sex Marriage – Reflections from the Emeritus

Jason [Lead Pastor UPBC] and the SST [Spiritual Support Team] felt it would be helpful for me to write to you and share some thoughts on the upcoming Plebiscite on Same Sex Marriage.

I am well aware that many people, both inside and outside the Church, are feeling a high level of anxiety and frustration with the public conversation on this, and have reached a point of saturation where they don't want to talk about it, speak about it or read about it anymore. What I am about to write is not some sort of counter argument, it is not a reaction to what others have written or said and it is certainly not a definitive work on this issue.

When I talk about Same Sex Marriage as an 'issue' I am well aware I am talking about people. People like you and me. People with hopes and dreams. People who want me, and need me to understand how easily I can hurt them by my careless words or unhelpful assumptions. People who need to know that the Church is not their enemy, nor are they the enemy of the Church.

Please understand that my thoughts are the musings of a Pastor. I am also the grandson of a politician and that is never far from my thoughts and instincts. But most of all they are the musings of someone just like you. Someone who has spent a lifetime wrestling with all the issues of life and wondering how we can respond to them with faith, with compassion and with a real sense of authenticity and respect for others. These thoughts are not meant to be imposed on others but they are a contribution to our society that can only be stronger when we face our differences together.

I am primarily writing this to our church but of course anything I write is in the public domain. It goes without saying that these are interesting times for the Church. It seems like the issue of Same Sex Marriage is the last straw for many who have been increasingly concerned about the place of the Church in our modern egalitarian society. Some have chosen to walk away. Others are lamenting the loss of the 'good old days' and feel helpless to bring them back! Others feel the

Church is being persecuted unfairly and have embraced a victim mentality where we are feeling sorry for ourselves. Many others can't walk away but they have lost their voice, lost their hope and have quietly retreated into the shadows hoping that they can live out their faith while the rest of the world rushes by. We watch with a mixture of sadness and trepidation.

None of these responses are a good posture for the Church. Most importantly, they do not set us in a good state of mind to engage in an issue as emotive and in many ways, complex, as Same Sex Marriage.

In contrast, we meet advocates of Same Sex Marriage who exhibit an energy and optimism that seems to have captured the imagination of a wide variety of people in our community. They are people who speak so passionately about love, equality and happiness. There is a sense in which it is all embracing and seems to resonate with the 'fair go' psyche of Australians.

To make things more complex for the Church, we have some influential church leaders and theologians who have come out in support of Same Sex Marriage. The 'grass roots' person of faith is left feeling insecure in the light of such theological and highly academic conversations. Our suppressed fear of looking or sounding naïve or silly rushes to the surface as we wonder if anything we think about this issue might be worthwhile or helpful. In a day like ours, the greatest 'sin' is to appear uneducated, simplistic and out of touch.

Perhaps the first thing I should say is that we all need to take a deep breath and relax a little. It could be for some of us the first time we have ever felt so helpless as a Christian or so pessimistic about the future of the Church. We need a real sense of peace and calm as we deal with a changing reality in our lives. The state of the Church and its gospel mission is not dependent on the outcome of this Plebiscite.

Can I remind you of some old but powerful words?

Be still and know that I am God [Psalm 46:10]

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. [Philippians 4:6-7]

Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.

[Proverbs 3:5-6]

It won't surprise you to know that last Thursday I was working in a cafe. As I went to the counter to pay the bill I noticed some beautiful rainbow-colored pamphlets with a resounding VOTE YES on the front. It made me think about this Plebiscite. As I looked at that really attractive brochure, I realised there is something progressive, something positive and something inviting about a 'yes' campaign. 'No' sounds so negative, unkind, harsh and defensive. Imagine the difference if the question was framed this way: Are you in favour of retaining the current definition of marriage as found in the Marriage Act of Australia 1961? Yes, sounds so much more affirmative, less obstructionist and more in keeping with people who have a positive outlook on life.

I am not suggesting for one minute that this important issue is all about how the question is framed but I sense that many Christians are carrying an unnecessary burden of feeling that they have to 'justify' a no vote simply because it seems so negative and mean spirited.

It is inevitable that this discussion on Same Sex Marriage has been enmeshed in a huge amount of emotion. That simply gives us an idea of how big an issue it is for us as a nation. As a rule, when dealing with complexity or deep differences, it is unhelpful to try and reduce the issue to simplistic or emotive terms. We all need to be aware of how hard it is to make wise decisions and balanced judgements when we are emotional, and when the stakes are raised in overly simplistic terms.

The very nature of the term 'Marriage Equality' has always made this a difficult issue to discuss. After all, who wants to advocate for 'inequality!' 'Equality seems to be a no brainer in today's world. People have every right to say: We just want to be treated equally. On the surface, it seems a simple solution to a contentious issue. Just change the definition of marriage to include everybody. However, I am not convinced that is the real issue here because equality in terms of relationship is not in question under Australian Law. If our Law is not sufficient at this stage there is certainly an appetite to amend it. But the issue at hand is whether we need to change the definition of marriage in order to recognise the social, legal, and relational validity of Same Sex Unions.

At a purely philosophical level, the questions that come to my mind are –

- Why is there a need to change the definition of marriage rather than giving equal status and validity to a civil union?
- What is to be gained by trying to make differences look the same, and call that equality?

We are trying to make a 'one size fits all' and that is rarely, if ever, a good outcome. I believe that this plebiscite assumes the only solution for 'status and acceptance' of same sex union is to call it marriage. In fact, our rapidly diversifying secular culture has the opportunity to promote civil union in its own right, and not by changing what that means for people with a different, albeit traditional understanding of marriage.

There is a perception that the Church is saying no to the happiness of LGBTI people. Nothing could be further from the truth. We now live in a society where we all have LGBTI friends or family members. This is not an issue of exclusion. This is not a matter of inequality. This is a wonderful opportunity for our modern society to embrace our new world where spirituality and secularity have to work hard to co-exist. It is not a time to change the meaning of things like marriage but to give new meaning to an emerging union between same sex couples.

I think the average Christian is feeling like this is a major 'test' for the Church but it needs to be said that this is also a major test for our secular society. The issue for our modern secular culture is this:

How well do we handle issues that have come with a freedom and liberality where objectivity is no longer found in religious belief but in the common view of the people?

There is no doubt that this has always been a key issue for the Church which, for centuries, has occupied a privileged position in our western societies. It must be said that we did not always handle that privilege with grace and understanding. But that mantle has now fallen on our secular society and with it comes responsibility to be mindful of its new privilege. It also needs to be mindful of the temptation to succumb to the same pitfalls and dogmas that it has attributed to the Church and by which the Church has been judged.

Is this a 'Christian' issue? Yes and no! Yes, because Christians are compelled to seek wisdom. Proverbs 4:7 says,

Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do! And whatever else you do, develop good judgment. Where do we get wisdom? The Psalmist says, The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple. [Psalm 139:147].

I get that this is difficult in itself because it seems logical that all Christians who have the Holy Spirit to guide them would think the same! However, when it comes to learning wisdom as broken human beings, it is not as simple as 'information in, information out'. It is more about 'formation' and that involves getting it wrong, learning from failure, growing in grace, forgiveness to and from others, humility and most of all submission to the God who knows us.

Somewhere along the way we as Christians have given the impression that we know everything. I would suggest that the very first thing wisdom teaches us is how little we really know. That is why we need to deal with the matter of Same Sex Marriage with great care and respect. This is not a matter of winning a debate. This is not a matter of coming up with the most impressive argument. This is not a matter of putting other people down while we bask in the simplistic self confidence that says, 'God says it, I believe it and that settles it!'. There is no room here for patronizing clichés or any expressions of love that are not completely genuine and demonstrable. That is not wisdom.

But wisdom is not weak and indecisive. It does not roll over under stress. It does not forfeit just because of danger. It does not ignore the challenge of finding a way through difficult times. In the light of this, the Baptist Churches of SA have affirmed the conviction from their understanding of the Bible, that marriage is to be understood as the union of a man and a woman. [This link will take you to a letter written by Mike Mills](#), the State Executive Minister.

I want to acknowledge that not all will agree with what Mike has written. However, I would affirm his words as genuine and helpful not only to the Baptist movement, but to the wider community that is seeking direction on this issue. The leadership at UPBC is happy to endorse them. Once again, these views are not given so as to impose some God given rite of passage on our wider community but they are a necessary and reasonable contribution to the discussion we are having as a Nation.

Having said that, this is not a 'Christian' issue. We live in a liberal democratic, secular society and the Church does not speak on behalf of all people. I have used the term secular a few times and maybe I need to clarify what it means. Secular society is not one devoid of religion or cultural differences but a society where all members of it are celebrated and included.

Secular cannot mean a society where we are asked to give up our convictions and beliefs and embrace John Lennon's mantra where we imagine a world where there is nothing to divide us, and where we are all just living for today. Before all the John Lennon fans send me hate mail, I hear his cry!

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one

I'm with you John! But what I don't share is that to be one we mustn't believe anything that might divide us. That defies reality and suppresses the very imagination you want us to have! I believe we are most 'one' when we seek to understand the things that divide us; where we respect others because they differ from us and where we understand that we can only become a stronger, more resilient and more progressive nation when we celebrate our differences.

In conclusion, I don't believe we can resolve difficult issues of fundamental contention by changing them to mean something else. In this case, changing marriage to mean something else. That simply shifts the problem to another place. Rather than trying to make marriage a 'one size fits all' issue, we would be much better working together to honour our differences and celebrating both marriage and civil union as a triumph of a society that is serious about being one, not in terms of sameness but in terms of selflessness. That is equality worth fighting for.

I accept that many Christians will find this as difficult as many of our LGBTI friends. But in a strange way, this is not so much a watershed moment for marriage, it is a watershed moment for our capacity as a secular society to deal wisely and graciously with an issue that has as much potential to bring us together as it has to divide us.

God Bless

Neil

Footnote:

I have restricted my thoughts to this singular issue of the Plebiscite. It is abundantly clear that the LGBTI community and the Church, and indeed the wider community who may not identify with either of these groups, have many complex issues to face in the days ahead, regardless of the outcome of the Plebiscite.

We face discussion on the issue of gender specific, sexuality and identity, the legal ramifications of children in Same Sex Unions, how the Church will deal with same sex families in their congregations and how the Church will handle the emerging theological differences in addressing the rapidly changing social fabric of our society. These are just a few things that immediately come to mind.

We have come a long way as a young nation. We will get some idea of how far by the manner in which we deal with others of different theological, social, relational or personal convictions. Let us not lose sight of the fact that critical moments of history give us an opportunity to grow together. They also remind us as Christians, that God is with us, because history is essentially HIS-STORY.

Appendix - Australians for Marriage

Baptist Churches SA, through Australian Baptist Ministries is a signatory to the following:

We are Australians united in support of marriage as the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life.

We come from different backgrounds, cultures and generations and are people of different beliefs and convictions. We live in cities, towns and Communities across Australia. Our diverse lifestyles reflect a wide range of life experiences and experiences of marriage and family.

We uphold that marriage as the union of a man and a woman:

- unites both genders on the basis of their natural difference and complementarity;
- provides a legal and Cultural structure to support and encourage parents to remain together for each other and for the good of their children; and
- helps to foster a range of social and economic benefits that enable individuals and Communities to flourish.

We affirm that for many Australians marriage as the union of a man and a woman is a matter of deep cultural conviction that merits the same respect as those who hold alternate views.

We believe Australia is, and should remain, a diverse and inclusive nation that upholds our fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech, conscience, association and religion. We know from the experience of other countries that these freedoms have been compromised and rapidly eroded when marriage has been redefined.

We recognise that current Australian law does and can continue to provide equivalent rights and protections for other relationships without the requirement to change the definition of marriage.

We assert that a respectful, considered and civil approach to discussing these issues is essential for all Australians.

We call on all Australians to lend their support to a continuing respect for the unique institution of marriage in our community and the laws and cultures that sustain it.

More information and resources are available at the [Australian Baptist Ministries website](#)