

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

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## Uniting Sin and Farce

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*For the sake of full disclosure, I should be up front in saying that I am writing this piece as an ordained Anglican minister who currently attends an evangelical Uniting Church, and who teaches in a non-denominational theological college.*

In July, the Uniting Church in Australia held its triennial general assembly; its once-in-three-years parliament. Although there were many matters discussed and decided upon, the most significant and controversial was a change to the denomination's marriage ordinance.

The proposal was to change the wording such that marriage was no longer between "a man and a woman" but between "two people". Obviously, this was the Uniting Church deciding on whether or not it would follow the culture and allow – and bless – gay marriage.

### Foregone and Farcical

Even before the Assembly, it was widely expected that the motion would succeed – people count the numbers for these kinds of votes. And while that proved to be the case, there was an odd twist. The Uniting Church did not change its existing marriage liturgy to allow for same-sex marriage, but agreed to add a second liturgy that did so. That is, by the end of the meeting, the Uniting Church had decided to approve two different liturgies for marriage; one traditional, one revisionist.

There was some good intent in this. The idea was that conservative congregations could continue with the existing definition of marriage, while progressives could change. Each local church community would thereby have the liberty to follow its own conscience.

It sounds good at one level, but it is actually quite farcical.

Imagine if the Australian Medical Association gathered to discuss whether or not it was safe to prescribe the controversial and powerful new "Medication X". After a long meeting that considered hard datasets as well as personal stories about individuals' experiences with Med X, the meeting concluded that they would let each doctor advise whether Med X was good or bad, according to their own opinion about it.

The public would then also be free to choose a doctor who would either warn them against the dangers of Med X, if that is what they wanted to hear, or else one who would talk up the benefits of Med X and hand it out if that was what they preferred. Win win. Everyone is happy. Neat work AMA.

***The Uniting Church... has not only failed to stand for clear biblical standards, it has also entered into farce.***

Except, of course, that it is completely ridiculous. This would be a decision for the AMA to deliberately speak out of both sides of its mouth, and it would lead not to a celebration of choice, but to great confusion as to what was right about Med X and whether Med X actually made any significant difference to human health one way

or the other – if it did, surely the AMA would have been clearer. It would also give rise to questions about whether the AMA continued to be any sort of reliable guide on such matters.

All of this is what the Uniting Church has done with marriage. It has not only failed to stand for clear biblical standards, it has also entered into this farce. But despite the double-talk (contra Matthew 5:37), the plain fact is this: the National Assembly has decided that it will modify this key moral position over which it has care and responsibility such that it reflects the post-Christian culture's values as much as the Bible. To pretend that this can mean nothing has changed for those who did not support that development is either naive or disingenuous.

## A Core Issue?

I have heard one lecturer from a Uniting Church ministry training college make the argument that since it is not necessary to be married in order to be Christian, the church ought not make beliefs about marriage determinative in questions of Christian unity. But this is not a sound argument. It does not follow that because the faith does not enjoin something for all, what we believe about that thing cannot be of critical importance.

Our views on marriage reflect our convictions about the authority and clarity of the Bible, about the necessity of faithful obedience, about what is healthy for human flourishing and about what brings glory to Jesus, and these are all core issues for Christians.

And of course marriage is an especially significant institution for Christians because, theologically speaking, we know that the ultimate marriage is between Christ and the church. The coming together of Creator and creation in the union of same-but-different is the great story of the Bible. Human marriages are meant to image and point to this meta-truth as two people who are male-and-female-different, yet flesh-of-my-flesh-same, come together in life-long union (eg. Genesis 1:27; 2:23; Ephesians 5:31–32; Revelation 21:9–14).

When we change our view of marriage to allow for the union of same-and-same, it not only affects marriage, it also pulls out one of the golden threads that so neatly binds our theology about Christ, salvation, the Church, the Bible's overall themes, and its teaching about our future.

Of course, how we feel about the Uniting Church's decision depends a lot on our view of denominations. If a denomination is little more than an administrative accrediting body – an office that signs off on celebrants' licences, enables tax breaks, manages insurance registers, and so on – then it might not matter too much. (I actually have some sympathy with this view, believing that the local church and the church universal are biblically grounded entities, whereas denominations are human constructs.) But if we think a denomination represents a fellowship of like-minded believers worshipping God in unity, co-labouring in a joint mission with a single message and sharing plans and resources with trust and confidence as we seek common outcomes, the proposed position looks quite untenable for evangelical members.

## Where to Now?

So where to from here? I am incredibly encouraged by the evangelical Uniting Church ministers who have called their congregations to forty days of prayer as they discuss next steps. I have no privileged inside knowledge, but I know they are talking together about the best group action that can be taken. There could perhaps be a fellowship established within the Uniting Church that parallels the GAFCON movement in the Anglican Communion. Or maybe a mass exodus to another denomination or accrediting body. Or something else. This is not my decision to make, but I do think that a coordinated approach will best serve the evangelical churches and congregation members far better than if each just independently started heading off in different directions.

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There are, however, two possibilities that I would particularly love to see explored. The Uniting Church as a whole could turn back to its historic doctrine and thus abandon the sinful and absurd outcome of the recent Assembly. This would bring real joy to so many as the great desire of our hearts is to experience that "Uniting" for which the church is named. However, if this cannot

happen, perhaps those who are so keen for same-sex marriage should consider leaving the denomination.

They could then start clean with their own new institution that could have whatever morality they choose, and in so doing they could allow the remaining Uniting Church to continue in the line of the Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists who sacrificed so much to establish the denomination in the first place, and who would never have altered its doctrine as the Assembly has. These things are above my pay grade, but not above God's, so I will now heed my pastor's call, and continue in prayer.



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