

Reflection on the Response to the EAI Statement on Civil Partnerships

“a sensible response to an existing reality based on biblical principles to which I am happy to subscribe”

“so culturally correct that you must be in the category of those who cannot love the Father because of your worship of the world”

These are just two of the many responses to the EAI Statement on Civil Partnership Legislation. Both came from leaders from similar parts of the Irish evangelical movement. Neither is connected to EAI. With such a diverse response it is hard to reflect briefly on all that has been said. But here goes.

Feedback

There was helpful and thoughtful comment both from those who agreed with and those who disagreed with the statement. Many wrestled with the implications of the statement. It is this kind of wrestling and discussion that the statement was intended to produce.

Some summarily dismissed the statement, in some cases apparently without reading it but relying on someone else's interpretation of the content. Some public comment on blogs completely misrepresented what the statement said.

Some who responded believed that the statement was being set out as the only possible evangelical response. This was not the intention but the statement was not clear enough about this.

Clarity

Some felt the statement was a departure from traditional Christian view of sexual ethics. All those who helped draw up the statement believe that sex outside of a male/female marriage relationship is contrary to God's will as expressed in the teaching of Scripture. That has been the view of the main Christian traditions throughout the history of the church and the statement affirms that view.

Furthermore, as the statement affirms, God's will is good for all society, not just Christians and the closer a society aligns itself with God's expressed will the better off that society is.

But the statement does not deal primarily with the ethical issue of same sex relationships nor is it intended to. This wider issue has been the subject of much writing and will continue to be. But this statement deals only with one particular piece of civil legislation and its implications. It addresses the question, what should a civil government do in law to address the issue of the widespread existence of same-sex partnerships? That is a valid question. Those who disagree with the EAI statement need to suggest alternative answers to the question rather than simply dismissing the proposed answer.

Jerusalem or Babylon

Perhaps the core issue that has arisen in the discussions is this: Should Christians demand that the State legislate according to Christian moral values? As one person comment put it – do we see ourselves in Jerusalem or Babylon?

In Jerusalem the believers were in charge and both the law and the culture reflected that in some measure. Many would like to believe we are still in Jerusalem.

By contrast in Babylon Yahweh's laws held no significance. So the exiles asked "how can we sing Yahweh's song in a strange land." It was (and is) a valid question.

If the public commentary on Ireland's current situation is correct then we are in Babylon now. The EAI Statement was framed on this assumption. It assumes that we need new thinking for a new era. But it is hard to leave behind the idea of Ireland's laws reflecting Christian morality.

Commenting on the situation in Britain, theologian Steve Holmes writes: *We have demanded too often that the law be brought into accord with our moral intuitions, without exception or reserve. Evangelicals have probably been worse at this than most.*

Given the history of Church and State in Ireland we should demonstrate an even greater wariness on this issue.

We are in a strange land now where virtually nothing can be taken as a given any more. We require a great deal of wisdom to respond to situations that are not covered directly in the teaching of Scripture. The Scriptures give us clear teaching on sexual ethics. They do not provide advice on how to respond to civil legislation being introduced in a society that is not shaped by Scripture's ethical values.

Conclusion

Two of the issues raised in the response are worthy of further consideration. One is the issue of freedom of conscience/religious liberty. It would be helpful to work on that issue without attaching it to one particular situation such as the Civil Partnership Bill.

The second issue is how much we have to learn about disagreeing well. Some of the correspondence received was a model of how to disagree well. But other correspondence showed that there are plenty who find it easier to denounce than to argue biblically for an alternative answer. In that context it was heartening to read the following reaction from a well known public theologian:

"This brief is one of the most intelligent and wise statements of this sort I have ever read. Clearly borne out of deep Christian conviction, it offers both realism and hope as it articulates a more difficult, but more helpful, alternative to the easy extremes."

Professor John Stackhouse, Sangwoo Youtong Chee Professor of Theology, Regent College, Vancouver.