

## Address to Christian Leaders Congress, Waikanae, May 26, 2005

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I suggest that the Churches could make a much needed contribution to our nation through a concerted and consistent support for marriage and family life, and the rights of children.

To do this, we need to do more than quote the Bible, though, of course, we must “live and move and have our being” in the word of God. We also need to be aware of the ideologies and cultural assumptions that are eroding marriage and family life. The moral relativism of the Western world is rooted in a deep-seated scepticism about whether it is even possible to know objective truth. Post modernism, by definition, denies that we can know what is true for everybody. And so there is nothing more than the opinions of individuals. From that premise, it is an easy step to the kind of claims often made about “individual choice” and “respecting diversity”. The reality is that not all choices are consistent with human dignity, whether in the home or the market place or the Parliament. And so they cannot all be justified on the basis of individual choice and respect for diversity.

I have some sympathy with those who brand us as prejudiced, intolerant and discriminatory. That is how it looks from where they stand. But they fail to examine the cultural assumptions on which they make their stand, which is why they simply resort to clichés about “respecting diversity”. In fact we respect difference even more than they do because we accept that there *is a difference* between right and wrong. Those who play down that difference are under-estimating the significance of diversity.

Of course we must respect the individual’s right to choose. But this doesn’t mean that all choices and opinions are “equally valid”. If individual choices were self-validating, then every choice would be right, which is patently absurd. There have to be ethical criteria beyond the individual’s right to choose.

The dignity and rights of every person must be respected no matter what their circumstances or what relationships they are in – even if their choices and their relationships are unethical. But their right to make choices does not automatically mean that their choices are right. “Respect for diversity” cannot exempt any of us from the responsibility of judging between right and wrong.

To illustrate all this, we need look no further than recent efforts to flatten out the differences between marriage and relationships that only simulate marriage. For example, a relationship that involves no definitive commitment is *different in kind* from a relationship that does, and has been sealed by vows – even though both kinds of relationships have resulted from “individual choice”. And, same-sex relationships are *different in kind* from relationships based on the complementarity of the sexes. To acknowledge these differences is not intolerance or prejudice; it is merely accepting reality.

The right of individuals to choose does not create an obligation on others to treat essentially different realities the same. Yes, of course we must respect the human and civil rights of people in non-married relationships. But their human and civil rights could have been legally secured without putting their *relationships* on a par with marriage. Of course, the real agenda was to promote those relationships as *morally acceptable alternatives to marriage*. So much for respecting difference.

I am not concerned here with whether or not that agenda has been achieved. I am trying to illustrate underlying ideologies and assumptions that we need to recognise.

Increasingly, it will be incumbent on the churches to lobby for the *greater protection for marriage and family life*. Don't expect a warm response from a government that as recently as last November declined to join 132 other countries which adopted a UN General Assembly declaration agreeing to "uphold, preserve and defend the institution of marriage".

The needs and rights of children also come into this. Children need, and have a right to, that security which derives directly from the vowed commitment of their father and mother. Couples who merely cohabit without having made that kind of commitment cannot offer children the same depth of security.

The consequences for children are increasingly borne out by experience. In Britain, it has been found that

whereas 52% of children born of cohabitants will see their parents split up before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, this applies to only 8% of children born within marriage. Moreover, even when a marriage fails, the absent parent is far more likely to stay in touch with and financially support their children, than the absent cohabitant....

Children of marriage have better relationships with their parents, are far less likely to experience poverty, will do better at school, are less likely to experience violence within the home, and have themselves a better chance of enjoying a successful marriage than children of cohabitants. (The Tablet, 12 February 2005)

Comparable statistics drawn up in New Zealand are: 43.9% of children born of de facto couples will see their parents split up before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, as against 10.9% of children born of married couples (D Fergusson *Family Formation, Dissolution and Reformation*, in *Proceedings of the SSRFC Symposium: New Zealand Families in the 80's and 90's*, NZ: Canterbury University, 20 November 1987, pp. 15-30).

Research has also shown that levels of infidelity, physical aggression, non-molestation orders, and crime are all higher among de facto partners than among married couples. Obviously, children are more at risk with de facto parents than with married parents.

Will it be any better for children of civil union couples? What these couples have in common with de facto couples is that they have decided not to make the kind of commitment that would have made them married.

Nor can we ignore the consequences for children of same-sex couples, who are unable to provide children with the natural combination of father-love and mother-love, which are *different*, and which *contribute differently* to children's formation. The absence of a child's father or mother is bad enough when it is not intended, but in same-sex partnerships it results from planning carried out by adults for adults.

Parenting has its natural roots in the relationship of a man and a woman. Changing the definition of parenthood simply to "child-caring", so as to include same-sex couples, does not work in favour of children. For over 40 years, there has been research into the effects of maternal deprivation. More recent research has begun to show that paternal deprivation is linked to the greater statistical likelihood of difficulties for children (both girls and boys), including emotional and behavioural problems requiring psychiatric

intervention, as well as sex role and gender identity, school performance, social skills, personal maturity and the control of aggression. Moreover, these children's own ability to be good parents is also at greater risk (cf Clare, Anthony *On Man, Masculinity in Crisis*, London, 2000, ch 7).

Of course, research is not everything; let us not fall into the trap of regarding as important only those things that can be quantified. There is a wisdom that regards the loss of a child's parent, precisely as father or as mother, as a loss to that child's development and well-being. There is also a wisdom born of experience that leads placement agencies to prefer to give a child the experience of having both a father and a mother.

The greatest security we can offer the children of our nation is well-informed, proactive and courageous support for marriage and family life.