

Theological Reflections

Marriage Equality Forum Series

Session II: Marriage in the Bible, history and tradition

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“Theological reflections on marriage equality”

Ask people the following questions and ask them to answer them silently to themselves.

Are you a man or a woman?

Are you gay, lesbian, bisexual or straight?

Are you legally married, or are you in a partnership that you consider to be marriage regardless of legal status, or are you partnered but do not consider yourself married, or are you single?

Have you ever been divorced?

If you are not lesbian, gay or bisexual, are you personally close to someone who is? Do you have a sibling, close friend, parent or child or other close relationship with a gay person?

I ask these questions because the way you answer each one of them impacts the way you view marriage.

None of us comes to this subject as a blank slate. This is a very loaded subject, as anything relating to sexuality is, and we all carry lots of emotion and pre-formed opinions about it, before we ever get to this room, to this forum for dialogue.

It's important to admit that in this sense none of us are IMPARTIAL, because all of our perspectives are limited, partial, arising out of our own unique perspective and personal experience....none of us see marriage from a purely objective viewpoint, as though from the eyes of God or from some universal vantage point.

In seminary, I was taught that to ask and answer these kinds of questions is to think about and be honest about our SOCIAL LOCATION. We all come from partial perspectives, based on things like our race, class, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, cultural and religious background and so forth. The reason we need to remember this is so that we will have some humility as we engage one another in discussion, and some sense we don't have the whole truth, and also so that we will be gentle with each other, recognizing that we all have been formed and shaped by our background

and experiences.

I also come from a particular social location and so I am not impartial. It's important to acknowledge that directly, so as not to pretend, as your pastor, that I am completely objective on this subject...that would be dishonest. As a single, lesbian Christian, I have a particular perspective that shapes my beliefs about marriage equality. I cannot help but have this perspective and to feel passionately about this subject, because it affects me directly, both in terms of who I am now and who I hope to become, when I find the life partner that I want to share the rest of my years on earth with. My perspective shapes my hopes and fears about this process, about how the church will handle this issue, just as your perspectives shape your hopes and fears.

With that introduction, I have been asked to share with you today some of the best arguments that have been made or are currently being made by theologians both for and against marriage equality. I am going to attempt to put on my teacher hat and share those different perspectives with you, trying to articulate them as fairly as possible, as their proponents would articulate them. Underneath my teacher hat, I am still Janet, though, so my own passions and views on this subject may bleed out, and color my presentation. However, I will do my best to present the different views on this subject that are currently informing the theological debate on this issue.

I will begin with theological objections to marriage for same-sex couples. We have a question on the table from last week...which was posed as a question for us to consider throughout our forum series, and it was not meant to be answered one way or the other last week. That question was, does a commitment to marriage equality flow naturally from our open and affirming stance as a church? Is it the logical next step or not? This is the question that is on the table. We start from the ONA stance, and as Masami said last week, we are not reopening that debate. A real question that we were never able to answer in our committee pre-study was whether or not there were good theological arguments against marriage equality that were consistent with an ONA position. So I am going to present right now some of the most intellectually and theologically rigorous arguments for defining marriage as exclusively between one man and one woman, and then we will have to discern whether or not any of these arguments are consistent with an ONA position, or whether or not adopting these arguments would take us back to a pre ONA position.

Main arguments why marriage can only be a union of one man with one woman:

Marriage is rooted in God's intention for men and women, as part of God's created order. When God created a partner for Adam in Genesis 2, he created a woman, not a man, and Genesis 2 clearly states that "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh."

Jesus, in one place, reaffirms this order of creation in Matthew 19 quotes this Genesis passage.

This is the main scriptural warrant for marriage being limited to one man and one woman.

Theological reflection over the centuries has developed and also expanded beyond this scriptural base to include the following arguments:

1) Marriage must be open to the "procreative possibility": What does that mean?

Only sex which, at least in theory, can lead to procreation is blessed by God. This is particularly a Catholic view, but some Protestants also adopt it. Also has a scriptural warrant....God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply.

Sex without the procreative possibility, in this view, can only be about physical pleasure or sexual gratification, and which, in this view, is morally worthless, it is morally empty. It is using the body as an instrument for self-gratification, rather than for its God-given purpose of creating more human life. So since only the biological union of male and female genitalia (or more technically speaking...one egg and one sperm) can produce human life, marriage must be limited to a man and a woman.

Now, sex can also be about companionship and can enhance the marital relationship, friendship, but only if it also includes the procreative possibility. Why can't sex that is for the sake of creating intimacy and love between two men or two women be sufficient, without the procreative possibility? One reason already given, it is too focused on sexual pleasure and this is morally empty.

2) The other reason that comes to the fore and is emphasized by virtually all opponents of same-sex marriage: marriage requires two genders...it requires gender complementarity. What does this mean?

Again, this rests on the creation of two genders by God. God created human beings male and female and brought them together to become one flesh. Marriage requires a partner of each gender...but why? If you dig deeper, here are the reasons that are given:

It is rooted in the idea that human beings basically come in two distinct types: the male type and the female type: or two natures: the male nature and the female nature. Men are different than women in body, mind, personality, and spirit. Separately from each other, men and women are incomplete....only when they join together as one, male and female, do they become fully complete. The point of marriage is to bring together two different natures, a man and a woman, into a complementary union....

So marriage requires two sexual or gendered "others" coming together...and this coming together of two gendered "others" is a model of selfless love and self-sacrifice. Max Stackhouse, a contemporary Presbyterian theologian from Princeton Theological Seminary, my alma mater, writes,

"The marriage bond is a community of love between those who are 'other.' This means not simply 'an-other' person, but one who is truly 'other.'" (i.e., a different gender).

As another evangelical theologian, Stanley Grenz, explains, "a homosexual union can never fully be a uniting of the persons as two who are other." So same sex unions cannot symbolize what Grenz says marriage is intended to convey, "the reconciliation of otherness on the deepest level."

In other words, the coming together of two men or two women is essentially narcissistic on some level, it is more about the love of self than the love of an other, since men are all essentially alike and women are all essentially alike.

3) Marriage should be between a man and a woman because every child needs a mother and a father. Children are harmed when they are raised in same-sex households, because they are not properly socialized into how to be men and women and how to form heterosexual relationships....so their psychological, sexual and emotional development is impeded.

Questions that proponents of the above arguments need to wrestle with:

- If marriage must include the procreative possibility, how can we allow

marriage between a man and a woman if one of them is infertile, or if they intend never to have children, or if they are past childbearing age? How can you exclude gay and lesbian people from marriage on this basis without also excluding heterosexual people who are unable or unwilling to have children?

- On the other hand, in the world of modern technology, is it even accurate to say that a marriage between two men or two women does not have procreative possibility? Also depends on how you define procreative....is not conceiving through artificial insemination or having children through adoption procreative? If not, then why should heterosexual couples be allowed to use these technologies or to adopt? Could the procreative impulse be looked at more broadly, as simply the impulse to generate life and to nurture life? In this case, can't gay and lesbian couples be generative in their relationships, in the sense of blessing their wider community through acts of generosity, service, and love for others?
- Is it true that sexual pleasure is morally empty? I will come back to this....
- Are human beings a two nature species or a one nature species? Are women and men more different from one another than they are alike? Or do we basically all share one human nature, with many different shades and colorings dependent on many factors, including gender, cultural background, personality type and so forth.
- If same-sex marriage harms children, why do none of the actual psychological studies that have been conducted demonstrate this? Why do they all indicate that the opposite is the case, and that children raised in gay or lesbian families are as healthy as children raised in straight families?

The theological case for marriage equality

I begin with our Synod resolution, which articulates several dimensions of the argument for marriage equality:

- Scripture neither commends a single marriage model nor commands all to marry, but rather calls for justice and love in all relationships (lines 71, 72). In other words, recognizing that Scripture contains multiple models for marriage and family, we have to look to the overarching themes of scripture and then apply them to the modern question of

same-sex marriage...what are the overarching themes?

According to the resolution and many theologians:

- Biblical witness and Jesus' ministry calls for love, compassion and justice towards all human beings who are created in the image of God. As the resolution states, "we recognize and affirm that, as created in God's image and gifted by God with human sexuality, all people have the right to lead lives that express justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure.
- The message of scripture evolves throughout the OT and NT but the arc of the gospel bends towards inclusion and compassion and justice. Hospitality and welcome to the stranger and the excluded other are major themes of the Bible...and we must ask, who is the excluded other today and how do we extend God's blessing to that person? Why shouldn't the early church's inclusion of Gentiles be a model for us today? The first Christians were Jews who lived according to traditional rituals and purity laws that were rooted in the only written scriptures they had...the Hebrew Bible....yet the Spirit moved them and they made a radical break from tradition by discarding the requirements of the Jewish law—because they saw that the Spirit was being poured out on the Gentiles and they were coming to know and believe in Christ and so old norms and laws were set aside when the Spirit of Christ was recognized as being as present among the Gentiles as it was among the Jewish believers in Christ.
- Marriage is being redefined according to new norms of equality, free choice, and mutual trust and commitment. The central ingredients necessary for marriage are love, fidelity, trust, and intimacy....not gender. This is based in a one-nature view of humanity....men and women share essentially the same nature, and by the same token, two men or two women may be as different from one another in personality and character as any heterosexual couple....so you can have complementarity and mutuality in a marriage of two people of the same gender as easily as between people of opposite genders.
- The primary commandment is to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And we are told to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This requires that we do justice to our neighbor. What does justice require?

First of all, it requires moral imagination....we must be able to really put

ourselves in the position of our neighbor and experience the world through his or her eyes. Can you imagine, if you are straight, what it would be like to be in love with someone but not be able to marry them simply because they are the wrong gender? As Jonathan Rauch writes, "to be prohibited from taking a spouse is not a minor inconvenience. It is a lacerating deprivation."

Why is it a lacerating deprivation?

Because gay and lesbian people are fully human and fully capable of the highest forms of love and commitment in their relationships, because they are not morally deficient, and because the gender of the marriage partner, in this view, is morally irrelevant. What is morally relevant in a relationship is whether or not the partners love one another, are faithful to one another, treat one another with kindness and respect. What is not morally relevant is what set of genitalia they have.

It is also a lacerating deprivation because separate is not equal....it never has been and never will be. Marriage in our society is the gold standard for intimate relationships. To create a separate status for gay and lesbian couples is ultimately discriminatory and connotes that our relationships are in some way inferior to straight relationships, and departing from the norm. Domestic partnership registration would be available to all couples, but marriage with its full set of rights and benefits would only be available to heterosexual couples...how is this not a form of discrimination?

With regards to the church, Protestant theologian Karen Lebacqz argues that treating two classes of persons differently "degrades the human person" and creates, "ipso facto, a 'second-class' citizenship for gay and lesbian people in the church." Ultimately, it communicates that gay and lesbian relationships are in some essential way fundamentally different from heterosexual relationships—different enough that they must be called by different names and given different legal status. Is this true? Many theologians today argue that it is not.

Finally contemporary theologians make two other positive arguments for same-sex marriage:

- with feminist theologians, they argue that sexual pleasure is actually good in and of itself....it is not morally empty. We are created as embodied beings with the capacity for pleasure, and pleasure is a gift from God. Also, sexual pleasure creates intimacy and builds love between two people, and generates a sense of happiness and well-being that enhances the health and well-being of both partners and of the relationship

- Same-sex marriage is good for society and for children. It strengthens marriage as an institution rather than weakens it, because it encourages more people, not less, to get married, and it strengthens the respect for marriage as an important institution in society that is a basic civil right. Further, it is good for families....children in all families need the protections that being married provides their parents, and children in same sex families learn to value diversity and to respect people who are different than them. They grow up to value tolerance and inclusivity and human rights.