

Scriptural Argument (Essentially, a revision of the excellent section I didn't write in 2012)

What does Scripture tell us about marriage that is authoritative or guidance for your deliberations this week? Perhaps we should begin with what it says that the vast majority of the church no longer believes is authoritative. We no longer condone marriages between half-siblings like Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 20.12) or first cousins, like Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 24.24,15). We no longer support multiple marriage, particularly perhaps multiple marriage involving two sisters marrying the same man, like Jacob with Rachael and Leah. (Gen 29.10). We no longer see marriage as a solution to, or absolution from the sexual exploitation of slaves or rape victims even though there is unequivocal language authorizing those actions in Hebrew Scriptures.

Each of these perhaps extreme examples reveals that scripture does not present a consistent Biblical standard of marriage. Throughout history, people of faith have had to contextualize the Biblical narrative on marriage. Many have looked to The Man and The Woman from the creation narratives as the first husband and wife, yet they were never married in any traditional sense. The concept and practice of Judeo-Christian marriage has continued to be redefined over thousands of years in response to culture's changing understanding of the needs of both the culture and spouses at different points in time. Many "rules" concerning who could marry whom within the descendants of Abraham and Sarah were meant to ensure that outsiders and their cultural norms did not infiltrate, corrupt and/or subsume the faith of the people of Israel. (Ex 34:16; Deut. 7:3-4). Centuries later, Ezra (Ch. 9 and 10) applied those laws anew when the Israelites found themselves under threat of being swallowed up by surrounding cultures when the people returned to Jerusalem from exile. For some in Jewish and Christian communities, this "unequally yoked" prohibition against marriage continues even today, even though the threat of cultural extinction is no longer present. But in the Presbyterian church, we see this "insider / outsider" distinction as outmoded, and marriages between Christians and people of other faiths or no formal religious commitment are conducted in our churches routinely, taking seriously Paul's proclamation to the church at Galatia that (Gal 3:28), "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

The Scriptures are as silent on same-gender marriages as they are on marriages between persons of different racial identities. To argue that this absence or silence means an automatic prohibition is akin to asserting that since the Bible is silent about monogamy, democracy, trial by jury, and freedom of speech that we are in error as 21st century Christians to adhere to those "new" ideals.

Throughout history, people of Faith have re-imagined and revised customs and practices related to the institution of marriage as they discerned God speaking to their time through the Holy Spirit. Despite new revelation, our forbears did not waiver from the rock-solid beliefs: 1) that God wanted people to be together rather than alone (Gen 2:18); 2) that God wanted people to live in community where they could mutually care for each other; 3) that God wanted us to care for our children regardless of the structure of our families. Despite parochialism in the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the scriptural arc since that time reveals God blessing and bringing outsiders into the tribes of Israel. Further, even during the time when outsiders were anathema, key figures are presented as having married inconsistently with Biblical standards without comment or condemnation: Moses was the very bearer of the laws that forbade marrying outsiders, even though he had married "the other" (Exodus 2:16-22); and Ruth, the outsider who flouted convention to emigrate and marry "inside" (Ruth 4:10) is recorded in scripture as the great-grandmother of King David and thus an ancestor of Jesus. Both of these marriage outliers foreshadow the ways Jesus revealed God's consistent refusal to live within the narrowly defined boxes of human customs, no matter how divinely inspired we believe them to be.

There is no greater example of the Divine will for freedom from mechanical enforcement of historical rules and norms than the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (Matt. 15:1-9). Jesus repeatedly disobeyed religious leaders who conflated their rules and their interpretations of the law with God's will and Divine lines in the sand. He provoked the wrath of the custom-bound religious leaders and this defiance led those leaders to conspire in his death. When overly strict scriptural interpretation resulted in rules that were not in the best interests of people and led to physical and spiritual deprivation, Jesus forcefully condemned both the inhumane interpretations of the law and those who insisted that their way was the only way (Mark 2:23-28).

While bloodlines and property inheritance dominated the concerns of ancient people, they are not our primary concerns. Today Presbyterian same-gender couples, with the support of their families of origin and families of faith, seek to include their marriages and the covenants they make in their creation as integral parts of their shared Christian life together. In our Presbyteries and congregations we do not see these couples as "the other." Our interpretation of scripture leads us to the conclusion that it is not only permissible but desired by God to do justice, to act with kindness and compassion to those who are seen by some as the "others," and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6: 8). Some in the church continue to see these couples as "the other" and claim that same-gender marriages are not Biblically supported. Paul addressed a similar situation in Galatians: 3:28 when people were interpreting the law and their new freedom in Christ in too limited a way. As we continue Assembly after Assembly to fail to

address this pastoral crisis of our own creation, it appears we are doing that now with same-gender couples. We would do well to remember that God commanded the people of Israel to place the “mercy seat” on top of the “law” when they built the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:21) to remind all that God sits in that seat and thus mercy trumps the law.

Our fellow heirs to this scriptural inheritance as represented in both Reformed and Conservative Judaism have embraced same-gender marriage as in keeping within their tradition. It seems odd to insist upon a less generous reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and the purity laws of Leviticus than the current Jewish community upholds.

Reinterpreting marriage has been at the heart of Protestantism from the very beginning. Luther said that priests could marry – and a group previously forbidden to marry through ecclesial interoperation of the scriptures was freed to form families through marriage. Likewise, Calvin had a different interpretation of marriage from the Catholic church of his day. And, of course, the Church of England was born from a reinterpretation of the rules on divorce and remarriage.

It was not until mid-way through the last century that scriptural interpretations prohibiting “mixed-race” marriages, were abandoned. The Presbyterian Church filed an influential friend of the court brief in *Loving v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court case that struck down those laws. As Christian Protestants, we have been freed by Christ from the law so we might become obedient “from the heart to the form of the teachings to which we are entrusted” (Romans 6:14-17), and we were unbound from the tyranny of institutional scriptural interpretations by the Reformation.

Then as now, we Presbyterians must allow the pastors freedom of conscience to interpret and act the way they are called and to lovingly bring people into Christian community (BOO F-3.0102). We must not bind the conscience nor continue the pain of a pastor who believes that marrying a same-gender couple is not only God’s will but an act of justice benefitting the community and preserving its Christian values. To do otherwise leads these ministers to violate other ordination vows, other parts of the Constitution (BOO F-1.0404), and the law of the Spirit which has freed us for righteousness (Romans 6:18). Likewise, we must not bind the conscience of those pastors who interpret scripture differently. An Authoritative Interpretation also allows pastors and sessions the freedom to refuse to marry opposite-gender couples whom they feel do not meet the criteria for Christian Marriage. To this end, we humbly ask for an Authoritative Interpretation of W-4.9000 that permits all pastors and sessions to maintain their traditional discretion.

(Most of the changes here were to make the presentation more conversational and streamlined. I still envision a full redraft once we have chosen an overarching theme for the presentation, as this is still fairly dry, though theologically and scripturally rich.)

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