

Marriage and the Bible...

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Our Mutual Joy

Opponents of gay marriage often cite Scripture. But what the Bible teaches about love argues for the other side.

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Let's try for a minute to take the religious conservatives at their word and define marriage as the Bible does. Shall we look to Abraham, the great patriarch, who slept with his servant when he discovered his beloved wife Sarah was infertile? Or to Jacob, who fathered children with four different women (two sisters and their servants)? Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon and the kings of Judah and Israel—all these fathers and heroes were polygamists. The New Testament model of marriage is hardly better. Jesus himself was single and preached an indifference to earthly attachments—especially family. The apostle Paul (also single) regarded marriage as an act of last resort for those unable to contain their animal lust. "It is better to marry than to burn with passion," says the apostle, in one of the most lukewarm endorsements of a treasured institution ever uttered. Would any contemporary heterosexual married couple—who likely woke up on their wedding day harboring some optimistic and newfangled ideas about gender equality and romantic love—turn to the Bible as a how-to script?

Of course not, yet the religious opponents of gay marriage would have it be so.

The battle over gay marriage has been waged for more than a decade, but within the last six months—since California legalized gay marriage and then, with a ballot initiative in November, amended its Constitution to prohibit it—the debate has grown into a full-scale war, with religious-rhetoric slinging to match. Not since 1860, when the country's pulpits were full of preachers pronouncing on slavery, pro and con, has one of our basic social (and economic) institutions been so subject to biblical scrutiny. But whereas in the Civil War the traditionalists had their James Henley Thornwell—and the advocates for change, their Henry Ward Beecher—this time the sides are unevenly matched. All the religious rhetoric, it seems, has been on the side of the gay-marriage opponents, who use Scripture as the foundation for their objections.

The argument goes something like this statement, which the Rev. Richard A. Hunter, a United Methodist minister, gave to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in June: "The Bible and Jesus define marriage as between one man and one woman. The church cannot condone or bless same-sex marriages because this stands in opposition to Scripture and our tradition."

To which there are two obvious responses: First, while the Bible and Jesus say many important things about love and family, neither explicitly defines marriage as between one man and one woman. And second, as the examples above illustrate, no sensible modern person wants marriage—theirs or anyone else's—to look in its particulars anything like what the Bible describes. "Marriage" in America refers to two separate things, a religious institution and a civil one, though it is most often enacted as a messy conflation of the two. As a civil institution, marriage offers practical benefits to both partners: contractual rights having to do with taxes; insurance; the care and custody of children; visitation rights; and inheritance. As a religious institution, marriage offers something else: a commitment of both partners before God to love, honor and cherish each other—in sickness and in health, for richer and poorer—in accordance with God's will. In a religious marriage, two people promise to take care of each other, profoundly, the way they believe God cares for them. Biblical literalists will disagree, but the Bible is a living document, powerful for more than 2,000 years because its truths speak to us even as we change through history. In that light, Scripture gives us no good reason why gays and lesbians should not be (civilly and religiously) married—and a number of excellent reasons why they should.

In the Old Testament, the concept of family is fundamental, but examples of what social conservatives would call "the traditional family" are scarcely to be found. Marriage was critical to the passing along of tradition and history, as well as to maintaining the Jews' precious and fragile monotheism. But as the Barnard University Bible scholar Alan Segal puts it, the arrangement was between "one man and as many women as he could pay for." Social conservatives point to Adam and Eve as evidence for their one man, one woman argument—in particular, this verse from Genesis: "Therefore shall a man leave his mother and father, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh." But as Segal says, if you believe that the Bible was written by men and not handed down in its leather bindings by God, then that verse was written by people for whom polygamy was the way of the world. (The fact that homosexual couples cannot procreate has also been raised as a biblical objection, for didn't God say, "Be fruitful and multiply"? But the Bible authors could never have imagined the brave new world of international adoption and assisted reproductive technology—and besides, heterosexuals who are infertile or past the age of reproducing get married all the time.)

Ozzie and Harriet are nowhere in the New Testament either. The biblical Jesus was—in spite of recent efforts of novelists to paint him otherwise—emphatically unmarried. He preached a radical kind of family, a caring community of believers, whose bond in God superseded all blood ties. Leave your families and follow me, Jesus says in the gospels. There will be no marriage in heaven, he says in Matthew. Jesus never mentions homosexuality, but he roundly condemns divorce (leaving a loophole in some cases for the husbands of unfaithful women).

The apostle Paul echoed the Christian Lord's lack of interest in matters of the flesh. For him, celibacy was the Christian ideal, but family stability was the best alternative. Marry if you must, he told his audiences, but do not get divorced. "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): a wife must not separate from her husband." It probably goes without saying that the phrase "gay marriage" does not appear in the Bible at all.

If the bible doesn't give abundant examples of traditional marriage, then what are the gay-marriage opponents really exercised about? Well, homosexuality, of course—specifically sex between men. Sex between women has never, even in biblical times, raised as much ire. In its entry on "Homosexual Practices," the Anchor Bible Dictionary notes that nowhere in the Bible do its authors refer to sex between women, "possibly because it did not result in true physical 'union' (by male entry)." The Bible does condemn gay male sex in a handful of passages. Twice Leviticus refers to sex between men as "an abomination" (King James version), but these are throwaway lines in a peculiar text given over to codes for living in the ancient Jewish world, a text that devotes verse after verse to treatments for leprosy, cleanliness rituals for menstruating women and the correct way to sacrifice a goat—or a lamb or a turtle dove. Most of us no longer heed Leviticus on haircuts or blood sacrifices; our modern understanding of the world has surpassed its prescriptions. Why would we regard its condemnation of homosexuality with more seriousness than we regard its advice, which is far lengthier, on the best price to pay for a slave?

Paul was tough on homosexuality, though recently progressive scholars have argued that his condemnation of men who "were inflamed with lust for one another" (which he calls "a perversion") is really a critique of the worst kind of wickedness: self-delusion, violence, promiscuity and debauchery. In his book "The Arrogance of Nations," the scholar Neil Elliott argues that Paul is referring in this famous passage to the depravity of the Roman emperors, the craven habits of Nero and Caligula, a reference his audience would have grasped instantly. "Paul is not talking about what we call homosexuality at all," Elliott says. "He's talking about a certain group of people who have done everything in this list. We're not dealing with anything like gay love or gay marriage. We're talking about really, really violent people who meet their end and are judged by God." In any case, one might add, Paul argued more strenuously against divorce—and at least half of the Christians in America disregard that teaching.

Religious objections to gay marriage are rooted not in the Bible at all, then, but in custom and tradition (and, to talk turkey for a minute, a personal discomfort with gay sex that transcends theological argument). Common prayers and rituals reflect our common practice: the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer describes the participants in a marriage as "the man and the woman." But common practice changes—and for the better, as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice." The Bible endorses slavery, a practice that Americans now universally consider shameful and barbaric. It recommends the death penalty for adulterers (and in Leviticus, for men who have sex with men, for that matter). It provides conceptual shelter for anti-Semites. A mature view of scriptural authority requires us, as we have in the past, to move beyond literalism. The Bible was written for a world so unlike our own, it's impossible to apply its rules, at face value, to ours.

Marriage, specifically, has evolved so as to be unrecognizable to the wives of Abraham and Jacob. Monogamy became the norm in the Christian world in the sixth century; husbands' frequent enjoyment of mistresses and prostitutes became taboo by the beginning of the 20th. (In the [NEWSWEEK POLL](#), 55 percent of respondents said that married heterosexuals who have sex with someone other than their spouses are more morally objectionable than a gay couple in a committed sexual relationship.) By the mid-19th century, U.S. courts were siding with wives who were the victims of domestic violence, and by

the 1970s most states had gotten rid of their "head and master" laws, which gave husbands the right to decide where a family would live and whether a wife would be able to take a job. Today's vision of marriage as a union of equal partners, joined in a relationship both romantic and pragmatic, is, by very recent standards, radical, says Stephanie Coontz, author of "Marriage, a History."

Religious wedding ceremonies have already changed to reflect new conceptions of marriage. Remember when we used to say "man and wife" instead of "husband and wife"? Remember when we stopped using the word "obey"? Even Miss Manners, the voice of tradition and reason, approved in 1997 of that change. "It seems," she wrote, "that dropping 'obey' was a sensible editing of a service that made assumptions about marriage that the society no longer holds."

We cannot look to the Bible as a marriage manual, but we can read it for universal truths as we struggle toward a more just future. The Bible offers inspiration and warning on the subjects of love, marriage, family and community. It speaks eloquently of the crucial role of families in a fair society and the risks we incur to ourselves and our children should we cease trying to bind ourselves together in loving pairs. Gay men like to point to the story of passionate King David and his friend Jonathan, with whom he was "one spirit" and whom he "loved as he loved himself." Conservatives say this is a story about a platonic friendship, but it is also a story about two men who stand up for each other in turbulent times, through violent war and the disapproval of a powerful parent. David rends his clothes at Jonathan's death and, in grieving, writes a song:

*I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
You were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
More wonderful than that of women.*

Here, the Bible praises enduring love between men. What Jonathan and David did or did not do in privacy is perhaps best left to history and our own imaginations.

In addition to its praise of friendship and its condemnation of divorce, the Bible gives many examples of marriages that defy convention yet benefit the greater community. The Torah discouraged the ancient Hebrews from marrying outside the tribe, yet Moses himself is married to a foreigner, Zipporah. Queen Esther is married to a non-Jew and, according to legend, saves the Jewish people. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, believes that Judaism thrives through diversity and inclusion. "I don't think Judaism should or ought to want to leave any portion of the human population outside the religious process," he says. "We should not want to leave [homosexuals] outside the sacred tent." The marriage of Joseph and Mary is also unorthodox (to say the least), a case of an unconventional arrangement accepted by society for the common good. The boy needed two human parents, after all.

In the Christian story, the message of acceptance for all is codified. Jesus reaches out to everyone, especially those on the margins, and brings the whole Christian community into his embrace. The Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and author, cites the story of Jesus revealing himself to the woman at the well— no matter that she had five former husbands and a current boyfriend—as evidence of Christ's all-

encompassing love. The great Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, emeritus professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, quotes the apostle Paul when he looks for biblical support of gay marriage: "There is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ." The religious argument for gay marriage, he adds, "is not generally made with reference to particular texts, but with the general conviction that the Bible is bent toward inclusiveness."

The practice of inclusion, even in defiance of social convention, the reaching out to outcasts, the emphasis on togetherness and community over and against chaos, depravity, indifference—all these biblical values argue for gay marriage. If one is for racial equality and the common nature of humanity, then the values of stability, monogamy and family necessarily follow. Terry Davis is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Hartford, Conn., and has been presiding over "holy unions" since 1992. "I'm against promiscuity—love ought to be expressed in committed relationships, not through casual sex, and I think the church should recognize the validity of committed same-sex relationships," he says.

Still, very few Jewish or Christian denominations do officially endorse gay marriage, even in the states where it is legal. The practice varies by region, by church or synagogue, even by cleric. More progressive denominations—the United Church of Christ, for example—have agreed to support gay marriage. Other denominations and dioceses will do "holy union" or "blessing" ceremonies, but shy away from the word "marriage" because it is politically explosive. So the frustrating, semantic question remains: should gay people be married in the same, sacramental sense that straight people are? I would argue that they should. If we are all God's children, made in his likeness and image, then to deny access to any sacrament based on sexuality is exactly the same thing as denying it based on skin color—and no serious (or even semiserious) person would argue that. People get married "for their mutual joy," explains the Rev. Chloe Breyer, executive director of the Interfaith Center in New York, quoting the Episcopal marriage ceremony. That's what religious people do: care for each other in spite of difficulty, she adds. In marriage, couples grow closer to God: "Being with one another in community is how you love God. That's what marriage is about."

More basic than theology, though, is human need. We want, as Abraham did, to grow old surrounded by friends and family and to be buried at last peacefully among them. We want, as Jesus taught, to love one another for our own good—and, not to be too grandiose about it, for the good of the world. We want our children to grow up in stable homes. What happens in the bedroom, really, has nothing to do with any of this. My friend the priest James Martin says his favorite Scripture relating to the question of homosexuality is Psalm 139, a song that praises the beauty and imperfection in all of us and that glorifies God's knowledge of our most secret selves: "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." And then he adds that in his heart he believes that if Jesus were alive today, he would reach out especially to the gays and lesbians among us, for "Jesus does not want people to be lonely and sad." Let the priest's prayer be our own.

With Sarah Ball and Anne Underwood

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