

Marriage practice, biblical interpretation and discernment

An analysis of the biblical views on marriage and a call for discernment

In a time when Western society is rapidly altering its image of marriage and government institutions have legally recognized same-sex marriage, the church is pressed to decide, Shall we follow suit?

The church is to discern between the fading form of this passing age and what is “good” and “acceptable” according to God’s will (Romans 12:2). Historically, the church has relied upon scriptural revelation, doctrinal tradition, rational wisdom and communal experience to guide discernment. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) acknowledges Scripture as “authoritative source” for the church’s discernment, the “standard” against which all other claims must be “tested and corrected” (Article 4).

Here, I venture to sketch the path that my thinking has taken thus far on the question of interpreting Scripture concerning marriage practice, in the hope that this might contribute constructively to the church’s discernment.

I do so cautiously, aware that this may elicit passionate reactions or touch pained places. I do so honestly, not pretending neutrality. I do so modestly, cognizant of necessary brevity and limited scope. I do so humbly, not presuming to understand perfectly or settle everything. I do so fraternally, as a fellow laborer in the Lord’s vineyard, inviting thoughtful consideration and faithful correction.

1. Marriage and Scripture: Analogies to slaves and women

Just as the church yesterday was wrong on slavery and women, some argue, so the church today is wrong on marriage. The church today denying blessing to same-sex union for biblical reasons is akin to the church yesterday giving sanction to slavery and patriarchy for biblical reasons.

This argument requires careful scrutiny. Are the cases actually parallel? How should we evaluate the comparisons?

Concerning slaves and women, there are texts in the Old Testament (OT) that legalize and legitimate slavery or patriarchy and even some texts in the New Testament (NT) that might be interpreted to reinforce oppressive or patriarchal practices. At the same time, there are textual strands running through the biblical canon that counter and thus point the church toward overturning previous practices of oppression and patriarchy.

Regarding slaves: We can trace an arc of liberation from the Exodus narrative to Sabbath and Jubilee law (Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15) to prophetic critique (Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 34:8-22) to gospel proclamation (Luke 4:16-21) to apostolic teaching (1 Corinthians 7:21; 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:11; 4:1; 1 Timothy 1:8-11; Philemon 15-17). Cumulatively, this canonical arc points toward abolition of slavery.

Regarding women: We can trace an arc of OT texts that teach “male and female” as made in God’s image and sharing

“dominion” over creation (Genesis 1:26-28), that honor women leaders in Israel (Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Judith) and that portray women as exemplars of covenant righteousness (Ruth and Naomi). This arc continues through NT texts that highlight women’s roles in Israel’s history (Matthew 1:1-16), that honor women’s participation in Jesus’ ministry and leadership in the early church (Mary, Martha, Joanna, Tabitha, Lydia, Prisca, Junia, Phoebe and others), that affirm unity of “male and female” in Christ (Galatians 3:28), and that call for mutuality between husbands and wives (1 Corinthians 7:3-5; 11:11-12; Ephesians 5:21-33). Cumulatively, this canonical arc points toward egalitarian practices.

The implicit norm across the biblical canon is that marital union is predicated on the created difference and sexed correspondence of male-and-female.

In each case, there are voices (for slavery and patriarchy) and countervoices (for liberation and equality) in the biblical canon. Comparing the countervoices to their canonical contexts and cultural backgrounds and connecting them into a canonical arc reveals a Spirit-guided redemptive movement that can guide the church’s discernment. We ask: How does that redemptive movement bear upon our situation? How can we act faithfully along that arc’s direction?

Taking the same approach in the case of marriage, we find that marriage practice throughout the biblical canon is neither simple nor static. Here, too, there are voices and countervoices (mono/poly-gamy, for/against intermarriage, hierarchy/mutuality, etc.).

Yet the intracanonical dynamic is constrained within the boundary of male-female union. The implicit norm across the biblical canon—evident in origins narrative (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-24); presumed in legal code (Leviticus 18), wisdom instruction (Proverbs 5-7), and pastoral counsel (1 Corinthians 7); apparent in poetic expression of erotic love (Song of Songs) and symbolic depiction of divine covenant (Isaiah 62:4-5; Hosea; Ephesians 5:22-32; Revelation 21:22)—is that marital union is predicated on the created difference and sexed correspondence of male-and-female.

Some today argue that the canonical pattern of male-female union is *normal* but not *normative*—and thus not re-

strictive of marriage practice in the church. Such arguments reinterpret key texts in Genesis.

Some argue that the Genesis story only describes what is and does not prescribe what should be: “male and female” becoming “one flesh” reflects common cultural custom but does not present a normative model for marital union. Jesus, however, read the Genesis story as having prescriptive import with respect to marriage practice. That “from the beginning of creation” God “made them male and female” and joined them in “one flesh” (Genesis 1:27; 2:24), as Jesus interpreted, indicates God’s intention for marriage, according to which Jesus judged the human practice of marriage (Mark 10:6-9; cf. Matthew 19:4-6).

Others argue that the biblical emphasis in marital union is on similarity not difference: the man’s becoming “one flesh” with the woman (Genesis 2:24) signifies the man’s union with a creature like in kind to himself (a human) not a human different in sex from himself (a woman). The Genesis text, however, equally emphasizes similarity and difference. The paired lines of poetic lyric highlight both human kinship (“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”) and sexed correspondence (“this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken”) in becoming “one flesh” (Genesis 2:23).

Concerning marriage and sex, moreover, Jesus and Paul dispensed teachings that are as restrictive as—or even more restrictive than—the OT.

The OT prohibited adultery (Exodus 20:14) but permitted divorce-and-remarriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Jesus intensified the commandment, judging that coveting a neighbor’s wife (Exodus 20:17) is adultery (Matthew 5:27-28). Similarly, Jesus subordinated the human accommodation reflected in the divorce law to the divine intention revealed in the creation story, ruling that God meant marriage to be permanent such that divorce-and-remarriage is adultery (Mark 10:2-12; cf. Malachi 2:13-16). Adhering to Jesus’ teaching, Paul prohibited divorce by believers and required divorcées to reconcile or not remarry (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).

Jesus allowed divorce-and-remarriage in cases of unchastity (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9). Also, Paul permitted remarriage in the church in cases of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15; cf. v. 39). Yet exceptions for divorce were not exceptions to the male-female pattern of marital union.

While the OT prohibited incest (Leviticus 18:6-16), a prohibition reinforced by Paul (1 Corinthians 5:1-2), it accommodated but regulated polygamy (Leviticus 18:17-18; Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Jesus’ teaching pictures marriage as an inseparable “two-become-one” (Mark 10:2-12; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31); and Paul’s instructions restrict marriage to “one wife” or “one husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2; 1 Timothy 3:2, 12; 5:9; Titus 1:5-6). These together arguably prohibit polygamy.

The major NT innovation concerns whether marrying and begetting are duties or even priorities. Apart from nazirite vows or prophetic vocations, celibacy was not a

general option: marrying-and-begetting was considered both duty and blessing (cf. Genesis 1:28; 9:1; Psalms 127, 128).

Jesus and Paul, celibate themselves, neither mandated marrying nor prioritized begetting. Jesus offered celibacy for the kingdom as an alternative to fidelity in marriage (Matthew 19:10-12) and deemed celibates worthy of the marriage-less coming age (Luke 20:34-36; cf. Revelation 14:1-5). Paul, anticipating the coming age and prioritizing the Lord’s service, commended celibacy over marrying (1 Corinthians 7:7-8, 25-40). Yet the celibacy option did not alter the male-female pattern of marital union.

The NT thus presents four countervoices concerning marriage practice: permanency, monogamy, mutuality and celibacy. Concerning same-sex practices, however, the biblical canon speaks with a single voice.

The biblical attitude concerning same-sex practices is sustained consistently: across both OT (Leviticus 18:2-30; 20:13) and NT (Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:8-11) canonical contexts; against both ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultural backgrounds, each of which tolerated same-sex practices; regarding both male-male (Leviticus; Romans) and female-female (Romans) relations; and regarding both possibly exploitive (Corinthians; Timothy) and likely mutual (Leviticus; Romans) relations. The canonical assessment is univocally negative.

Even were disputed texts concerning same-sex practices discounted, there would be no positive voice in the biblical canon that counters the male-female pattern of marital union.

The redemptive movement throughout the biblical canon is thus always away from same-sex practices. Even were disputed texts concerning same-sex practices discounted, there would be no positive voice in the biblical canon that counters the male-female pattern of marital union. No law permits or counsel commends or story favors same-sex union—unless one twists the text to turn David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi into erotic lovers. Still, some appeal to God’s working the divine purpose through marriages in non-normal ways—Abraham and Sarah or Mary and Joseph—as evidence that God would bless non-normative unions. Yet these instances themselves exhibit the normative pattern of male-female union.

Amid diverse voices across the biblical canon, the marriage arc consistently evidences that marital union in the present age is predicated on the created order of male-and-female. Insofar as the church anticipates the coming age of

renewed creation, the NT points beyond marrying-and-begetting toward celibacy, not same-sex union.

The case of same-sex union, therefore, is not analogous to the cases of slaves and women. While canonical arcs reveal redemptive movements pointing toward liberation of slaves and equality for women, no parallel arc points toward sanctioning same-sex union.

2. Marriage and membership: Analogy to Gentiles

If the church is to discern an affirmation of same-sex union, then we must derive from the biblical canon a clear reason that compellingly warrants diverging from the canonical marriage arc. That reason must answer this question: Why should the church follow the counter directions of the liberationist and egalitarian arcs but then diverge from the consistent direction of the marriage arc? We next consider a prominent argument for divergence.

There are various texts throughout the biblical canon that augur for reception of Gentiles, Samaritans, eunuchs and others who were formerly considered “outsiders” to Israel as members-by-faith of God’s people. We can trace this canonical arc from exodus narrative (Exodus 12:38) to

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covenant code (Exodus 22:21; 23:9) to holiness code (Leviticus 19:33-34) to festal law (Deuteronomy 16) to prophetic witness (Isaiah 56:3-8) to Jesus’ genealogy (Matthew 1:1-16) to Jesus’ ministry (Matthew 19:12; Luke 5:27-39; 14:12-24; John 4:1-42) to early church (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 8:4-40) to apostolic teaching (Galatians 3:27-28; Ephesians 2:11-22; Col 3:11; 1 Peter 2:9-10) to apocalyptic vision (Revelation 5:9-10). This inclusionary arc reveals a Spirit-guided redemptive movement that should shape a receptive posture in the church today toward various “outsiders,” including sexual minorities.

Some today invoke the inclusionary arc concerning marriage practice. Might “outsider” inclusion in membership be a precedent for same-sex inclusion in marriage? Might the church thus judge that the inclusionary arc supercedes the marriage arc? Some argue that the church today should redefine marriage as sex-undifferentiated to sanction same-sex union in analogy to how the early church redefined membership as ethnicity-neutral to receive Gentiles. This argument requires careful scrutiny.

“Outsider” inclusion did have an immediate implication for marriage practice: Gentile membership shifted the intermarriage boundary from Jew/Gentile (never addressed in the NT) to believer/nonbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12-16; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1). Yet Jew-Gentile union was no exception to the male-female pattern.

To redefine marriage in analogy to membership, moreover, would blur the distinction between belonging (who is “in” and on what terms) and behaving (acting as befits belonging). That distinction in the church’s discernment is evidenced in a key text along the inclusionary arc: Acts 15.

At the Jerusalem council, the apostles and elders discerned that the church should receive Gentiles on the same terms as Jews. Peter testified: “In giving [Gentiles] the Holy Spirit ... and in cleansing their hearts by faith [God] has made no distinction between [Gentiles] and [Jews]” (15:8-9; cf. 10:34-35, 44-47). Nonetheless, the council made a distinction between Gentile members, who were received on faith by grace (15:11), and certain practices, from which believers were required to abstain (15:19-21).

Still, some argue that waiving the OT requirement of circumcision for Gentile believers is precedent for waiving OT restrictions on sexual practice for today’s church.

Let’s hear the apostolic decree: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (15:28-29). The generic term “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) covered various forms of illicit sex (e.g., prostitution, fornication, incest, adultery).

Intended to facilitate Gentile-Jew fellowship, these “requirements” were likely derived from holiness laws pertaining to aliens residing within Israel. Those laws forbade idolatry, eating blood or carrion, and various forms of illicit sex, including same-sex acts (Leviticus 17:8-18:30). Or, possibly, these “requirements” reflected the common ethic of Hellenistic Judaism, which was derived from the Mosaic Law and transmitted through synagogue teaching. Adapting and selecting biblical law for Jewish life in Hellenistic culture, this common ethic prohibited idolatry and various forms of illicit sex, including same-sex acts. Either way, rather than simply abrogating OT law, the council discerned by the Holy Spirit how to appropriate OT law for the church.

The Jerusalem council reinforced canonical norms concerning sexual practice at the same time that it received Gentiles as members. The NT continued teaching consistently against “sexual immorality” across various contexts (Romans 13:11-14; 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 9-13; 6:9-20; 7:2; 2 Corinthians 12:19-21; Galatians 5:16-24; Ephesians 5:3-5; Colossians 3:1-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Revelation 19:2; 22:15). The early church taught likewise (Didache 2:2; 3:3; 5:1; Hermas Mand. 4; Ep. Barnabas 19:4).

Marriage, therefore, is not analogous to membership. The Jerusalem council, in redrawing membership boundaries to include Gentiles, did not redraw moral boundaries in any way that deviated from the canonical arc concerning marital

union and sexual practice.

3. Marriage practice and church discernment

The apostolic decision at the Jerusalem council, which “seemed good to the Holy Spirit,” set an enduring precedent for the church’s discernment of what is “acceptable” to God. The council’s discernment worked along the inclusionary arc but without letting membership inclusion override moral norms or redefine marital union. Therefore, for the church today to honor the canonical precedent of the Jerusalem council, we must hold both arcs together in our discernment.

Two important implications follow. The inclusionary arc is not optional for church practice, contrary to the inclinations of some traditionalists. At the same time, the inclusionary arc cannot be pitted against or privileged over the marriage arc, contrary to the claims of some innovationists.

This canonical-arc approach to biblical interpretation thus yields these questions to guide the church’s discernment: How do the marriage and inclusionary arcs together bear on our situation with respect to membership inclusion, marriage practice and sexual minorities? How might the church act faithfully along both arcs?

Let us prayerfully seek the instruction and guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13) as we forbear patiently with one another in love and “the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:2-3).—*Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, a member of Salem Mennonite Church in Elida, Ohio*

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