

What God Has Joined Together? : A Christian Case for Gay Marriage

by David G. Myers & Letha Dawson Scanzoni
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Finally there is a book which celebrates Christian marriage and celebrates same sex covenant commitment. As a marriage and family therapist, who trains others, and as a Canadian Anglican who has been on my Church's controversial 1993-95 national task force on same sex relations, I can't recommend this timely book strongly enough. While Canada has now taken the formal step in Parliament to make legal homosexual marriage (and to call it "marriage", and not simply "civil union"), Canadian churches have been locked in heated debate – such that other critical issues, such as child poverty at home, and Canada's peacekeeping role abroad, have taken a back seat in the consciousness of many Christian denominations. According to some Christian leaders, the culture will rise or fall over the issue of homosexuality! Thus, the importance of *What God Has Joined Together?* as a gracious voice provides a much needed perspective in the current dialogue sweeping all of North America.

The authors' forward is a "Personal Letter to our Readers" in which they set out their premise: "We believe in marriage... We want to see couples flourish... We believe that society, by supporting marriage, benefits... We believe that opening marriage for gay and lesbian people could actually strengthen the institution for all people." They go on to say: "in this book written by and for heterosexuals, we offer faith-informed and behavioural-science-informed reflections on sexual orientation, the human need to belong, and Christian sexual ethics.... If you approach this book as a faith-based marriage supporter, be assured: so do we."

Clarifying their purpose and intention from the outset, Myers and Scanzoni go on to argue clearly for a 'third way' which affirms the pro-marriage stance of Church and society, while contending that by also affirming the aspirations of gay and lesbian persons to have secure commitments the institution of marriage itself will be strengthened for all people. They believe that those who promote "family values" and a biblically-rooted faith can come to understand that these same values of covenantal commitment will be a blessing for all people, whether homosexual or heterosexual.

Myers and Scanzoni write that "the life of faith is a dance on the boundary between conviction and humility." They offer this book in the spirit of both, humbly offering a reasoned and convincing argument for a perspective that has been lost in the "culture wars" that have arisen across Europe and North America, in both Church and State, on the subject of same sex marriage.

They build a bridge between conservatives and liberals, and between Biblical understanding and the current knowledge of the social sciences, that is a welcome voice in the ever-widening gulf among and between people of faith. Theirs is a vision of truth-telling and peace-making.

The authors begin their argument with an excellent look at the universal human need to belong, and the breakdown of the bonds of relationship and of society when people are denied opportunities for genuine belonging and acceptance. Exploring the work of John Bowlby, whose

pioneer research on attachment theory concluded that “intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person’s life revolves”, the authors clearly explain how social ostracism affects the very activity of the brain, causing real pain in the anterior cingulate cortex, which is the centre activated in response to physical pain. If rejected and thwarted in their need to belong, people respond with hurt, anxiety, and depression. And as the authors point out, our society is witnessing soaring rates of depression as kinship connections have waned. This decline of commitment to faith communities and to family is a serious social issue facing us all.

In his 1992 book, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, David Myers explored what, psychologically, produces a happy and satisfied life: in addition to general traits of optimism and positive self-esteem, of finding connection and meaningful hope through faith communities, of enjoying the ‘flow’ of work and recreation, Myers emphasized the need for loving and being loved through the social bonds of committed relationships, where times of celebration and of suffering and sorrow can be shared.

“Mountains of data confirm that most people are happier attached.”, and married people report greater happiness and life satisfaction extending across countries and including both genders. “Social support predicts a lessened risk of ill health and premature death”. In their thorough research, Myers and Scanzoni report many studies in the social sciences which confirm the “longing for belonging”, the apt title of their first chapter. Studies have revealed that there are “striking similarities in the love and satisfaction experienced by same-sex couples and heterosexual couples.” Further, that protecting same-sex relationships is tantamount to protecting the well-being of the partners involved in those relationships. The covenant relationship called marriage exists, as does friendship, because human beings are not meant to be alone.

In “The State of our Unions”, the authors examine divorce and the long-term effects on children, concluding that extensive social research has strong implications for our personal lives and public policies. The devastation of increasing rates of divorce call for public policies which need to be aimed at cementing strong social ties, which would include tax breaks and supporting marriage for gay and lesbian couples. They argue that the antidote to poverty is a social safety net plus a marriage-promoting culture. “Marriage offers economies of partnership, and it can provide both partners with a sense of responsibility and pride as stable, productive citizens.” The chapter “A Newer World” points towards an equal marriage-and-child-supporting culture. They examine the toxic forces which challenge the flourishing of children in nurturing families: the social consequences of unemployment and inequality, the media models of impulsive sexuality, and the increase in self-focused individualism. Their critique of the latter two is particularly acute.

In the chapters on understanding and changing sexual orientation, Myers and Scanzoni ground their discussion in an understanding of the our calling as Christians to worship God with an “ever-reforming sense of humility.” They ask – and answer – the two major questions: first, should sexual orientation be regarded as a natural, given disposition or as a moral choice? and second, can those wishing to change their sexual orientation undertake the effort with some

reasonable hope of success? While acknowledging that “we glimpse only in a dim mirror the precise ways in which biology and experience interact”, they point out the accumulating evidence of differences in brain anatomy and prenatal hormonal influences which help to explain sexual orientation. “The consistency of the genetic, neural, and biochemical findings has swung the pendulum towards a greater appreciation of biological influences.” The conclusion of the authors is that *people do not experience their own sexual orientation as a choice*. However it is on this very point that the Christian community differs. Myers and Scanzoni address the issue of the “ex-gay” movement and the model of “reparative therapy” with great respect. They cite the study of a Columbia University psychiatrist, Robert Spitzer, who interviewed 274 Americans who claimed to be helped by ex-gay ministries, and concluded that only a few people change their orientation “with great difficulty”: “in fact, I suspect” (writes Spitzer) “that the vast majority of gay people would be unable to alter by much a firmly established homosexual orientation.” While some people are able to function or perform heterosexually, it need not signify a conversion of their orientation to heterosexuality. Myers and Scanzoni leave the reader with an important spiritual reflection in their reference to Reinhold Niebuhr’s prayer: “Well-meaning people of faith will continue to struggle ... as they seek grace to accept with serenity what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and the wisdom to discern the one from the other.”

In the chapter “What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say”, the authors explore in context the various Scriptural passages, four New Testament and six Old Testament, and they show the diversity of Biblical translations. Pointing out that the word “homosexuality” is never used in Scripture, and the fact that what we today understand as homosexual *orientation* is never referred to, they provide an honest approach to the controversial issue of hermeneutics, and articulate a clear understanding of Christian sexual ethics for both hetero- and homosexual persons.

Finally, in their concluding summation in the chapter on gay marriage, they openly declare: “As marriage advocates, we nevertheless have become persuaded that the case for same-sex marriage is more persuasive than the case against it.” They argue for law and culture, including the culture of faith communities, to affirm and support mutual covenants for gay and lesbians. Again, making reference to strategic studies conducted by the prestigious Gottman Institute, they point out that gay and lesbian couples are comparable to straight relationships in many ways, and in terms of enduring happiness. Because marriage as a social institution gives a combination of connectedness and social legitimacy, with all its privileges and rights it also brings duties and responsibilities. And while Myers and Scanzoni examine other options to marriage, such as civil unions or domestic partnerships, they conclude that only marriage gives the rights *and* responsibilities essential to a stable society, and to the raising of children and care for the aged. (This was an important argument in our Canadian national debate prior to the new legislation.) The authors convincingly argue that “the flood that threatens the house of marriage [in Europe and North America] is not gay marriage, but heterosexual non-marriage. The real threat comes from the alternatives-to-marriage movement of heterosexuals in our culture. Thus, they conclude by saying “... if implemented as part of a pro-marriage initiative, inviting gay couples to say ‘I do’ may help reverse the growing tendency for straight couples to say ‘we don’t’.

This remarkable book is thorough in its depth and scope. It is easy reading for the ordinary

layperson, and the Appendix offers astute discussion topics for each chapter, allowing for groups to explore the book in depth. Myers and Scanzoni are moved by an understanding of the Church as ever-reforming. May their valuable gift to the Church be a blessing to many.

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