

I am writing, as a lesbian Anglican lay person and not as a representative of my parish or diocese, in support of amending the Marriage Canon (XXI) to include same-sex couples, although with some reservation because, indeed, what I understand to be more appropriate would be for the church to remove itself from the business of civil marriage entirely. Marriage is the only sacrament that has import in terms of civil law, which makes it inconsistent with the other sacraments of the church.

As I understand it, Scripture is far from univocal on the matter of marriage. Genesis in general is often cited as a counter to recognition or blessing of same-sex unions, e.g., the oft-repeated “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” although Genesis has very little to say about marriage. The injunction to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1.28) follows the description of the creation of people as male and female and comment that “God blessed them”, without stating the nature of the relationship (1.27-1.28a). What it does have something to say about is companionship—it was not good for the unnamed first person to be alone (Gen. 2.18a). Fundamentally, then, scripture recognizes the importance of living in relationship. The books of the law give a substantial number of conditions under which divorce may take place (e.g., Deuteronomy 24.1-4) and both the stories of the patriarchs and the historical books note fairly flexible numbers of wives and concubines. In the gospels, there is little directly on marriage. Indeed, one of the most cryptic pericopes in John is the encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well (John 4.16-18). Just what Jesus is saying about marriage when he tells the woman that her current partner is not her husband is quite unclear. In the letter literature, Paul repeatedly presents marriage as distinctly secondary to a life of celibacy (1 Cor. 7 at multiple points), although in Corinthians and Ephesians he argues for how the relationship within marriage should function. Both the gospels and the letters have quite a bit to say about divorce (e.g., Matt. 5.21; 19.3-10; Mark 10.2-12; Luke 16.18; 1 Cor. 7.11), but we have disregarded those injunctions for some time now on good pastoral grounds.

In Christian tradition, the Roman practice of civil marriage persisted as an action separate from the blessing of relationships by the church well into Christian history. An easily accessible example of this appears in the “General Prologue” to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1388-1400) when the narrator reports of the Wife of Bath that “housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five” (“GP”, 462). What is described here is a civil property transaction, not a blessing. To disentangle the two would be truer to tradition than to elide civil marriage and sacrament.

In terms of the functions of marriage according to Canon XXI, the only one that seems directly supported by Scripture is companionship. Many heterosexual couples enter marriage fully aware that they will not be able to procreate or decide not to. At the same time, both heterosexual and same-sex couples successfully nurture children through adoption. Marriage does support the development of a faithful sexual relationship through the support of the community, but this seems equally the case for the promises made before God and a Christian community in the

blessing of a relationship. Faithful sexual relationship is not, I think, particularly attached to marriage.

In terms of making a distinction between blessing and marriage and exploring the sacramentality of marriage, perhaps a primary point that should be dealt with first is that in the Thirty Nine Articles, marriage is not actually a sacrament (see Article XXV). The only sacraments fundamental to our tradition are Baptism and Eucharist, while the others “partly are states of life allowed in the scriptures: but have not like nature of Sacraments with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for that they have not any visible sign ceremony ordained of God”. However, insofar as, by virtue of two people making promises to each other in God and actions are taken by a priest, marriage does function as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. I do not, however, think that the sacramentality of marriage is any greater than that of blessing a commitment to relationship. Neither has an effect on the constitution of the body of Christ and while witnessed by a community, neither constitutes or changes that community. In the end, I do not think there is much to distinguish a blessing from a marriage, so to maintain a distinction solely on the ground of sustaining privilege for one kind of adult relationship seems duplicitious. Either we should denote all ceremonies in which relationships are blessed and celebrated as “blessings” or we should amend the marriage canon. What we should not do is maintain the current double standard.

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