

A CHRISTIAN CASE FOR SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Most media coverage of the D.C. Council's steps toward civil marriage equality for same-sex couples has followed a worn-out script that gives the role of speaking for God to clergy who are opposed to equality. As the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, I would say respectfully to my fellow Christians that people who deny others the blessings they claim for themselves should not assume they speak for the Almighty. And to journalists I would offer a short history of changing Christian understandings of the institution of marriage.

Christians have always argued about marriage. Jesus criticized the Mosaic law on divorce, saying "What God has joined together let no man separate." But we don't see clergy demanding that the city council make divorce illegal.

Some conservative Christian leaders claim that their understanding of marriage is central to Christian teaching. How do they square that claim with the Apostle Paul's teaching that marriage is an inferior state, one reserved for people who are not able to stay singly celibate and resist the temptation to fornication?

As historian Stephanie Coontz points out, the church did not bless marriages until the third century, or define marriage as a sacrament until 1215. The church embraced many of the assumptions of the patriarchal culture, in which women and marriageable children were assets to be controlled and exploited to the advantage of the man who headed their household. The theology of marriage was heavily influenced by economic and legal considerations; it emphasized procreation, and spoke only secondarily of the "mutual consolation of the spouses."

In the 19th and 20th centuries, however, the relationship of the spouses assumed new importance, as the church came to understand that marriage was a profoundly spiritual relationship in which partners experienced, through mutual affection and self-sacrifice, the unconditional love of God.

The Episcopal Church's 1979 Book of Common Prayer puts it this way: "We believe that the union of husband and wife, in heart, body and mind, is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord."

Our evolving understanding of what marriage is leads, of necessity, to a re-examination of who it is for. Most Christian denominations no longer teach that all sex acts must be open to the possibility of procreation, and therefore contraception is permitted. Nor do they hold that infertility precludes marriage. The church has deepened its understanding of the way in which faithful couples experience and embody the love of the creator for creation. In so doing, it has put itself in a position to consider whether same-sex couples should be allowed to marry.

Theologically, therefore, Christian support for same-sex marriage is not a dramatic break with tradition, but a recognition that the church's understanding of marriage has changed dramatically over 2,000 years.

I have been addressing the sound theological foundation for a new religious understanding of marriage, because it disturbs me greatly to see opposition to marriage for same-sex couples portrayed as the only genuinely religious or Christian position. I am somewhat awed by the breadth of religious belief and life experience reflected among more than 200 clergy colleagues who are publicly supporting marriage equality in D.C.

But it's important to emphasize that the actions taken by the D.C. Council do not address the religious meaning of marriage at all. The proposed legislation would not force any congregation to change its religious teachings or bless any couple. Our current laws do not force any denomination to offer religious

blessing to second marriages, yet those marriages, like interfaith marriages, are equal in the sight of the law even though some churches do not consider them religiously valid.

Existing laws require religious organizations that receive public funding to extend the same benefits to gay employees as to straight ones. In many instances, that includes health care for spouses. This has led some religious leaders, who believe same-sex marriage to be sinful, to threaten to get out of the social service business. I respect these individuals' right to their convictions, but I do not follow their logic. The Catholic Church, for instance, teaches that remarriage without an annulment is sinful, yet it has not campaigned against extending health benefits to such couples. Additionally, several Catholic dioceses in states that permit same-sex marriage have found a way to accommodate themselves to such laws.

D.C.'s proposed marriage equality law explicitly protects the religious liberty of those who believe that God's love can be reflected in the loving commitment between two people of the same sex and of those who do not find God there. This is as it should be in a society so deeply rooted in the principles of religious freedom and equality under the law.

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See also the Order of Service for a same-sex marriage at http://philosophy-religion.org/bob_rich/pdf/Final-Wedding-Proof.pdf .