

Same-Sex Marriage in Cultural Perspective

Introductory essay to an interview with Robert Gagnon

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The first decade of the third millennium may be characterized by future generations of Church historians as the period in which radical redefinitions of sexual ethics and of the meaning of marriage became institutionalized in Western Protestant churches. The formal cause of this shift is the effort, in church and state, to redefine marriage as an institution in which gender is irrelevant. In the Anglican Communion, among Methodists, Presbyterians, and in other denominations, North American Protestants are wrestling with a host of interwoven theological issues. This is clearly not just a debate about sexuality, but about the relationship between revelation and culture, about the nature of human identity, about law and grace, the relationship of desire and restraint, the claims of justice, and the meaning of sin and salvation.

Unfortunately, much of the public commentary in the secular press has reduced this wide-ranging shift to a civil rights issue, in part because that is the way the public debate about laws concerning homosexual practice has been framed. But the paradigm of civil rights avoids the substantive ethical issues at stake, specifically whether marriage is simply an arbitrary social construction, amenable to reconfiguration however we like, or is it an arrangement in the nature of things that has boundaries, a substantive identity that preexists and limits our making laws about it.

The way the argument in favor of redefining marriage to allow for same-sex couples has been advanced presents many occasions for comment about the influence of deeper and broader cultural trends. Michael Sandel and others have noted that we have moved from a substantive notion of justice to a procedural one; that is, we increasingly eliminate public discussion about the value of *ends*, and are only concerned politically with

equality of *means*. Mary Ann Glendon has warned about the prevalence of Rights Talk in our legal culture, especially in family law, with disastrous consequences. Both of these insights are immediately obvious in the present discussion, making the debate about the grounds for same-sex marriage a case in point of some troubling larger trends.

Sociologist Craig Gay has observed that the issue of homosexuality has emerged as a prominent public issue because of the modern understanding of the nature of the self and of the rejection of the idea of created nature. Similarly, theologian Philip Turner has suggested that in the debate about this issue we see a textbook case of what Alasdair MacIntyre has called “emotivism,” the notion that all judgments about value are expressions of preference. I alluded to ideas of justice a moment ago, and I had in mind the emergence of the idea of justice as fairness at the expense of justice as retribution. These and other large cultural and philosophical arguments are intertwined with the debate about same-sex marriage specifically and the asserted moral equality of homosexual and heterosexual activity in general.

Within the churches, on one side of this debate are those who defend the historic Christian teaching on sexuality and who largely agree with the suggestion that Western culture at large is increasingly post-Christian in its underlying principles. On this side, it is assumed that there will always be some discernible dissonance between the Church and the World, and that part of the mission of the Holy Spirit through the Church is, as Jesus says in John 16, to tell the World that it is wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.

On the other side are those who reject the historic Christian teaching and who seem to believe that the World,

as represented by its most self-consciously progressive institutions and thinkers, is ahead of the Church in ushering in the Kingdom of God, indeed that the World is right in telling the Church that it is wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. They say that God is doing a new thing, but they seem unable to imagine that God might say “No” to any new thing done in the World in the name of progress. There seems to be no room on the part of the revisionists for any truly prophetic word to be spoken to the World’s claims about love and justice. It is odd, in light of the whole story of God’s people since the calling of Abraham, that we are assumed to be in a unique time of history, a time when those institutions outside the Church that are otherwise most antagonistic to the Church’s historic message about sin and redemption are understood to know more about human identity and liberation than does the Church.

Now all of this cultural triangulation is not finally decisive evidence, although it at least invites some questions. And the really important question is whether or not we have a clear word from God about this. What do the Scriptures say? During the period defined by the existence of God’s covenant people in Israel and the Church, it has been assumed that we had a fairly clear description in Law, Prophets, Sacred Writings, Gospels and Epistles about the shape of marriage and human sexuality, and homosexual acts were not within the bounds of permissible or divinely approved behavior. In the past two decades, a number of scholars and clergy have argued that we have misinterpreted those texts, that in fact, the Bible is either equivocal in its condemnation of homosexual activity, or that its authority on such matters can be jettisoned on the grounds of a superior hermeneutical principle, supported by modern scientific knowledge.

A few years ago, Robert Gagnon, assistant professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, wrote a book that refutes both of those claims. In *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, Gagnon carefully looks at the relevant biblical texts, at contemporaneous texts, and at a number of hermeneutical strategies that have been used to undermine the historical interpretation of biblical teaching.

Quite a few notable New Testament scholars have praised Gagnon’s book for its scholarly care and pastoral compassion. Max Stackhouse, who teaches ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote: “Although the work is not polemical in tone, it also becomes clear that some widely quoted authorities and contemporary advocates of sexual liberation in this area have misread the historical and textual data and missed contemporary scientific, classical argument and pastoral evidence.” And Bruce Metzger, a professor emeritus of New Testament from Princeton Seminary and one of the 20th century’s most respected experts in Bible translation and textual criticism, described the book as “extraordinarily satisfying, being based on the author’s impeccable scholarship and a compassionate pastoral approach to the subject.”

When we talked about his book, Robert Gagnon described the ways in which many Christians who are not scholars are intimidated by the arguments made by revisionists.

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