

Opinion: Church's gay marriage policy change a good thing

By Henry G. Brinton

The long evolution of marriage has continued in the Presbyterian Church (USA), with the decision last month to redefine marriage as “a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives.” Previously, marriage had been permitted in the church only “between a woman and a man.”

While many people fear that this change represents a departure from biblical authority, I am convinced that it brings us closer to the Christian ideal of the covenant of marriage – a promise-based relationship of life-long love and commitment, with deep roots in Scripture.

Traditional marriage has been in flux for thousands of years, with numerous elements discarded for good reason. For most of human history, marriage has been a financial decision determined in large part by property transfers. The wedding question “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” is a remnant of this transaction – the pastor is asking the father of the bride to transfer ownership of his daughter to the groom. Good riddance to this practice.

Polygamy is another traditional marriage arrangement that most people now reject. Yes, it made sense in ancient Israel, when families needed to have as many children as possible, to herd the sheep, fight the wars and continue the family line. Polygamy was an efficient way to create the largest possible families, but it imposed second-class status on women. Monogamy is now the law in the United States, for good reason.

But polygamy does raise the question of procreation, which has been a central feature of marriage for most of human history. Biblical prohibitions against same-gender sexual activity (Leviticus 18:22) and masturbation (Genesis 38:9) are designed to encourage procreation, since these activities do not produce offspring. Today, many Christians consider procreation to be an essential aspect of marriage, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church says that “sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.”

The Bible, however, does not put procreation at the heart of the covenant of marriage. In Genesis 2:18, God creates Adam and Eve and says, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” God’s decision to create Eve doesn’t emphasize procreation but stresses relationship. Later, the prophet Hosea suggests that the marriage relationship should be one of mutual love, justice, respect and fidelity (2:19-20), with the wife calling her spouse “my husband” and not “my master” (2:16).

Jesus did not marry, nor did he advise his disciples to marry. He certainly viewed marriage in a positive way, and discouraged divorce out of concern for the welfare of vulnerable women and children (Matthew 19:1-9). But procreation was not a top priority for Jesus or his followers.

At the heart of the message of Jesus is the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). This is lived out in numerous ways, including the life-long love and commitment that is at the heart of the covenant of marriage. Children can be produced by this relationship, but they are not essential to it. In fact, many couples who are too old to have children are married in Christian churches every day, with the full expectation that they will have rich and satisfying marriages.

With its redefinition of marriage, the Presbyterian Church

(USA) has focused in a biblical way on covenant – a relationship that can be entered into by any two people who are willing to promise to be faithful to each other for as long as they both shall live. Such a marriage is deeply rooted in the Christian faith, and does nothing to undermine traditional heterosexual marriage. If anything, the desire of same-gender couples to make promises to each other should be a challenge and an inspiration to heterosexual couples.

In his book “The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage,” Presbyterian Mark Achtemeier writes, “a relationship of mutual love and commitment with a beloved partner reflects growth into the image of Christ’s self-giving love. It is precisely through giving ourselves away in this fashion that human beings find our true selves.”

Because these words are equally true for same-gender and heterosexual Christians, I am glad that my denomination has now changed its definition of marriage.

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