

An Overture to the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Central Presbyterian Church requests that Heartland Presbytery respectfully overture the 220th General Assembly (2012) to adopt the following change to W-4.9000 of the BOOK OF ORDER [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]:

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. ~~Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man.~~ For Christians, marriage is a covenant through which ~~a man and a woman~~ *two people* are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made ~~by a woman and a man to each other~~ *between two people*, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith. [W-4.9001]

- a) In preparation for the marriage service, the teaching elder shall provide for a discussion with the ~~man and the woman~~ *two people to be married* concerning [W-4.9002]

...

The service begins with scriptural sentences and a brief statement of purpose. The ~~man and the woman~~ *two people to be married* shall declare their intention to enter into Christian marriage and shall exchange vows of love and faithfulness. ... In the name of the triune God the teaching elder shall declare publicly that the ~~woman and the man~~ *two people* are now joined in marriage. [W-4.9004]

...

A service of worship recognizing a civil marriage and confirming it in the community of faith may be appropriate when requested ~~by the couple~~. The service will be similar to the marriage service except that the opening statement, the declaration of intention, the exchange of the vows by the ~~husband and wife~~ *two people*, and the public declaration by the teaching elder reflect the fact that the ~~woman and man are~~ *two people* are already married to one another according to the laws of the state. [W-4.9006]

Rationale

In six states (Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Vermont) and in the District of Columbia it is not factually true that "marriage is a civil contract between a man and a woman", exclusively. This error in the Directory for Worship creates an untenable situation for teaching elders and commissioned ruling elders whose conscience tells them to exercise their pastoral responsibility and perform marriages between same-gender loving couples while the Church tells them to fear prosecution if they do so. Such prosecutions place tremendous financial burden on presbyteries, and faithful elders, and diminish the Church's ability to extend its mission and ministry to all persons.

We are Called to Make Disciples

In the Book of Order, we declare,

"The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people... proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation... In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission... by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission." [F-1.01]

"No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to profession of faith. The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel." [G-1.0302]

"The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving... "[W-2.4011]

According to this, Presbyterians call all people to discipleship in Christ, live to glorify God, extend the fellowship of Christ to all people, and recognize that none of us earns or deserves God's grace.

The Marriage Ceremony is Worship

In our order for worship, we listen to the Word, proclaim the Word, and respond to the Word. Responding to the Word is a demonstration of the love of God for God's people.

"The response to the proclamation of the Word is expressed in an affirmation of faith and commitment... Response to the Word also involves acts of commitment and recognition... acts of commitment which may appropriately be included as response to the Word are (a) Christian marriage,..." [W-3.3500, W-3.3502, W-3.3503]

According to this, Presbyterians view Christian marriage as an act of worship.

Our Polity

One part of our current Presbyterian polity specifically excludes a group of people when it comes to worship: those people in loving, committed, Christian relationships who are also of the same gender and wish to marry. However elsewhere in our polity, we hold up the words of Jesus Christ:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3:27-29). ... The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership." [F-1.0403]

Biblical Reflection

There is no consistent Biblical model for marriage. The Old Testament patriarchs and kings were polygamists (Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon). Jesus was unmarried himself, and preached indifference to earthly attachments as one's primary love, including family (Luke 9.60; Matthew 12.46-50; Matthew 22.30). Paul cited marriage as the lesser option (to celibacy) for those unable to contain their carnal desire (I Corinthians 7.8-9). Nowhere does the Bible expressly define marriage as between one man and one woman. Neither does the Bible serve us well as a how-to manual on modern marriage.

Several scriptures which may seem to provide Biblical injunction against same gender marriage are not about marriage at all, but are focused on specific sex acts, and appear in the larger context of a range of abusive, violent, exploitive, debasing and perverse ancient pagan practices. These bear no resemblance to the situation of modern-day, Christian, same-gender loving adults who freely wish to commit themselves to the covenant of marriage with the blessing of their church.

These isolated texts address the evils of rape (Genesis 19, Judges 19, Deuteronomy 22.25, II Samuel 13); prostitution (Deuteronomy 23.17, I Kings 14.24, 22.46, II Kings 23.7, I Corinthians 6.9); and pagan practices or promiscuous behavior (Leviticus 18.22, 20.13, Romans 1.26-27, Jude 7), things far different from love.

They also neglect the wider sweep of significant and defining Biblical themes such as Christ's all encompassing love (John 4, Galatians 3.27-29); the value of commitment in relationships (Ruth 1.16-17,

I Samuel 18.1-4); God's creation of each person in God's own image (Genesis 1.26-27); and God's full knowledge and acceptance of our whole selves (Psalm 139, John 4.29, Acts 10.34, I Corinthians 13.12-13).

A Reformed interpretation of scripture insists on a wider lens, as stated in the Second Helvetic Confession

"..we hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and (our) salvation."

Conclusion

We are all trying to discern God's Word for us. And as surely as we are all unique creations of the loving God, we will each of us disagree from time to time. But if we profess to call all people to Christ, to call all people to proclaim God's love for us in worship, to guarantee full participation in worship to all persons, we must give teaching elders and sessions the discretion to choose, according to their conscience, to recognize the covenant of Christian marriage for two people of the same gender just as we allow teaching elders and sessions the discretion to choose otherwise. To do anything else denies one group within our membership the opportunity to fully worship God.