

# “On Marriage: Whose Head and Whose Title?”

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**Third Presbyterian Church**

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**Matthew 22:15-22**

Two weeks ago, I did something that I rarely do, that is, speak to a particular topic on a Sunday morning, the Presbyterian Church’s decision on the Middle East at this past June’s General Assembly. I do it so rarely that I am doing it again this morning, this time, focusing on that same General Assembly’s decision on marriage, what is variously called marriage equality, same gender marriage or same sex marriage.

For more than 30 years, the Presbyterian Church debated, often very contentiously, the issue of who can or cannot be ordained to church office. Four years ago ordination became a settled issue, and I am grateful to have had some small role in that ongoing effort, to advance the cause and to work for the church’s unity in the face of significant disagreement. I am more so grateful that this congregation has provided significant leadership, almost from the very beginning.

The marriage discussion has arrived much more quickly. Our first real consideration of it was only two years ago, where efforts to change the church’s definition of marriage failed. Two years later would be different, some suggested, given changed perspectives in the culture, given recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings and given, more particularly, the fact that the Presbyterian Church has experienced the exit of many congregations, some quite large, to other denominations, over the issue of ordination.

There were two marriage “proposals” at this General Assembly, one with two facets.

One proposal would have kept our definitions and practices exactly where they were, demonstrating a concurrence with the notion that same-gender relationships were inherently sinful and that marriage should exist only between one man and one woman.

The alternative view disagreed with that basic premise – the “marriage equality” perspective. There were two paths to get to marriage equality at this General Assembly.

One was something called an “authoritative interpretation,” a provision in our constitution that allows for the interpretation of a particular policy or guideline where there was perceived disagreement or confusion about its application. That’s as technical as we need to be this morning. The proposed authoritative interpretation in this case posited that ministers needed

guidance when the church said one thing about marriage and the state said another; in this case, what would a minister do in a state, like the state of New York, when marriage equality was the civil law and church law said something altogether different. The authoritative interpretation – or A.I. – would give ministers the pastoral latitude to perform marriages in those states where it was legal, without changing the church’s definition.

The second proposal was a flat-out change in the church’s definition of marriage, quite apart from the issue of what was legal in a particular state or not.

Those who favored marriage equality were not unified in their approach. Some wanted the A.I., primarily for pastoral and practical reasons; once passed, it would allow ministers to perform marriages immediately. Others wanted the change in language, arguing that as long as the restrictive wording was on the books, our policy was unjust.

Some conservatives, sensing that change might be imminent, said that they could live with the Authoritative Interpretation as long as our definition held fast. Others said that the Authoritative Interpretation was an end run to our process, and if we were to change our position and practice, we should do it properly, through the front door.

As a commissioner and moderator candidate, I was ready to make the case that as a minister in the state of New York who believed in marriage equality, I most needed the pastoral latitude *now* to be able to respond to people in the congregation I serve who were seeking marriage.

The marriage committee recommended both actions, and you can read in the bulletin<sup>i</sup> (see endnote) that by comfortable margins we approved both.

The General Assembly adopted the A.I. first, so it seemed clear that that provision would pass as well. In fact, part of what might have allowed that language to pass by the margin it did was an amendment I made. (Little old me!) I moved that we amend the new wording to include “traditionally, a man and a woman” following the words “two people.”

My amendment passed by a large majority. I was criticized a bit for pandering to the conservative side of the church, but I can tell you that my intention was anything but that. Being a believer both in forward progress on marriage and the unity of the church, and sensing that this proposal would pass anyway, I wanted to reach out to my more conservative colleagues to demonstrate a sensitivity to their perspective all the while knowing that a change was likely to happen. After the fact, I had more than a few conservative Presbyterians thank me, though not all, and more than a few progressive Presbyterians thank me as well, though not all. I doubt that church history will remember what I fondly think of as the “Wilkinson amendment,” but it was kind of fun to see it quoted in the *New York Times*, and even better to think that somehow we’ve advanced both the church’s position on marriage and a modest effort to hold the church together in the face of change.

Many Third Church-ers have worked on change over time, but before I say anything else, I need to recognize two people. Betty Iwan is a former chair of our More Light Committee who has worked tirelessly on constitutional change, working on overtures over many General Assemblies. Her gentle, patient and persistent faithfulness has been a gift to the church.

And Ralph Carter's joyful presence at General Assembly after General Assembly, his unwavering witness, his very embodiment of what hope looks like, has inspired me and so many. Ralph's testimony to this year's General Assembly committee on marriage no doubt converted hearts and votes, and did so passionately and eloquently. Betty, and Ralph, thank you!

So where do we stand? In the state of New York, we can perform marriages now. In fact, if anyone wants to be married, meet me after church and we can work something out! Just kidding...marriage at Third Church is a reflective, deliberative matter for any couple, as it should be.

We are just beginning the process of voting on the proposed constitutional change. A majority of presbyteries needs to vote affirmatively to pass the amendment. Our presbytery, the Presbytery of Genesee Valley, will vote on March 21.

Having said that I could live with the pastoral latitude I so needed, I do now hope that the constitutional provision will pass. But I hope it will pass with this consideration in mind. During the debate, conservative Presbyterians expressed concern that they would be forced to marry people they felt conscious-bound not to. That never seemed a solid argument to me. I have the pastoral prerogative to say "no" to a straight couple *now*, and have done so, if I thought that that marriage was not a sound proposition. I would have the same prerogative to say "no" to a gay or lesbian couple presenting themselves for marriage. Such assurance was even embedded in the provisions we passed.

The concern now runs in a different direction – the theological examination as a minister seeks to move from one presbytery to another. How we vote is a matter of conscience, and is based on the application of a whole range of standards. I will state now that as much as I agree with the rights of any two people to get married, with appropriate pastoral oversight, that I will not vote against any candidate simply because she or he holds an opposite view. I am against litmus tests of most any kind, and I would be against this kind of automatic thumbs down simply because a prospective presbytery colleague and I disagreed on this. As my friend Barbara Wheeler writes: "... (Let's) not...reject anyone called and fit for service because we think that their views on sexuality, marriage and related topics are wrong." (Albany Presbytery, September 25, 2014)

The theological word for that is "forbearance," and I hope I can exercise it in my own ministry, and I hope that we can demonstrate it collectively and communally.

I would rather have my conservative friends stay within our family so we can continue to discuss these things, and perhaps win hearts and minds, rather than us going to our respective

corners to set more deeply in stone our convictions. I don't think I am wrong on this, but I am surely wrong on plenty, and I need all the help I can get on my own spiritual journey, and to talk with people only who believe what I believe, leaving me to my own like-minded devices, seems boring at the least and unfaithful at the most. We are better off having many perspectives in our common life; after all, "a bird needs two wings to fly." Some of my best friends are progressives; some of my best friends need to be evangelicals and conservatives as well. We need each other, for the good of the church and the good of our souls.

It should come as no surprise for you to hear me say, as I have just suggested, that I support marriage equality. Once you accept the basic affirmation, as I have, that same gender attraction and intimacy is NOT sinful, or stated more positively, can be a gift of the Spirit, then the case for marriage is not a difficult one to make. It flows naturally and logically. In fact, it would have been more helpful, and perhaps more faithful, for the Presbyterian Church to make a determination on this more basic understanding of human relationships and human sexuality before we moved to the church-y issue of ordination.

It doesn't take me to remind you that the institution of marriage itself is under siege. Fewer marriages are holding together. Fewer people are getting married, and fewer of those who are not married want to be. That's why the argument that gay or lesbian marriage is a threat to heterosexual marriage never quite made sense to me. Straight marriage seems to be doing pretty badly on its own.

In fact, I make the argument that the journey to lesbian and gay marriage has been a conservative one. If straight culture is running away from marriage, why would LGBT people run toward it, except for the fact that people – lesbian *and* gay *and* straight – are seeking committed, covenanted, faithful, life-long relationship, supported and blessed by the church, and how on earth can the church be opposed to that?

We still have much to ponder about marriage. The thin connection to this morning's lectionary reading from Matthew happens as Jesus takes on issues of church and state, faith and politics and culture as he answers a question about ultimate allegiance and taxes. That reminds us that marriage is a place, one of the last places, where church and state collide. When I sign a marriage license, I am serving as an agent of the state. Each time I sign one, I ask myself: What's that about? Is that good or bad or unclear?

I am hopeful that even as we work toward a vote in the church on a constitutional provision, we can have healthy and constructive discussions about all of this and offer a positive witness to the church and the world, leading rather than following. Might we explore:

- What it means to live *in* culture but not *of* culture.
- What it means to embrace a vision of justice and equality.
- What marriage means as an act of faith.
- What it means to live with difference of opinion.

My friend Mark Achtemeier, a theological conservative, has had a change of heart on matters of human sexuality, and he has written a book called *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*. Mark concludes his work by writing: "God's word really is for them; the gospel is for them; Christ's love is for them; God's gifts of marriage and love and sexuality are *for them*. And the church of Jesus Christ needs to be for them, too. Biblical faithfulness requires it." (Page 131)

Every time Mark uses the word "them," he means gay and lesbian persons. Every time he uses the word "them," I would also say the word "us." That's the point. Or another way to say it, in words traditional and familiar: "Those whom God has joined together, let no person separate." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This June, the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) agreed to grant ministers discretion in determining whether or not to conduct same-gender marriages in civil jurisdictions where such marriages are legal. This action is called an "authoritative interpretation." The action effectively removes the ban on Presbyterian ministers marrying same-gender couples in those jurisdictions. The vote on the authoritative interpretation – which took effect immediately – was 371-238 or 61 percent to 39 percent.

The Assembly also approved sending out for presbytery approval a constitutional amendment to W-4.9001 of the PC(USA)'s *Book of Order* that would change the constitutional definition of marriage from "between a man and a woman" to "between two people, traditionally a man and a woman." The vote on the proposed constitutional amendment – which goes to the denomination's 172 presbyteries for ratification – was 429-175 or 71 percent to 29 percent. A majority of the presbyteries must vote approval of the measure for it to take effect.