

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



Marriage Equality and Religion Frequently Asked Questions – The Marriage Project,* The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry

What is marriage? It depends. The definition of marriage has always varied depending on the religious, cultural and political circumstances of a particular society. In some contexts, marriage is a covenant of love; in others it involves primarily a legal arrangement ensuring property inheritance rights. It is often a complex mixture of both.

Hasn't marriage always been between one man and one woman? No, it has not. In many cultures, both ancient and modern, polygamy has been quite common, which describes the relationship of one husband with multiple wives. This was, in fact, the predominant pattern of human family in ancient Israelite and other near-Eastern and Mediterranean cultures.

What is marriage in the United States? This depends on the individual states. Each state has the right to define and regulate what constitutes a legal marriage in this country. Regardless of which state one considers, the history of marriage in the United States exhibits a dual nature we still see today, which includes a complex mix of both legal contracts and religious covenants. Ordained clergy, for example, function as duly authorized agents of the state when they sign marriage licenses after performing religious ceremonies, yet couples do not necessarily need to be married in a religious ceremony for their marriage to be legally recognized.

Why is marriage considered a civil contract? In this country and many other countries, marriage primarily constitutes a legal agreement between two people that is confirmed and validated by state-designated officials. Regardless of what religious rites a couple may participate in, they are only legally married if they can obtain a properly registered state license. Moreover, a couple who obtain a validated license from a state-designated official are married whether or not they chose to participate in any religious rites at all.

Why is marriage a political issue? Marriage is a political issue because the civil contract of marriage extends over 1,000 federal benefits to married couples from which lesbian and gay couples are currently excluded. That makes marriage not only a political issue, but an issue of social justice as well.

Have states ever restricted civil marriage in the past? Yes. States have the right to regulate who can obtain marriage licenses and these regulations vary from state to state. For example, while some states allow first cousins to marry, others do not. Likewise, until relatively recently, some states did not allow couples of "mixed races" to marry. Laws forbidding this practice – known as miscegenation – changed only through the intervention of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967.

Doesn't our government have a responsibility to protect the sanctity of marriage? No. What constitutes something as "sacred" is the exclusive realm of religious tradition and communities of faith. The government's sole responsibility in this arena is to ensure just and equal protection under the law for every American citizen. That's why the U.S. Constitution insists on the separation of "church and state."

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Is marriage a religious sacrament? Only for some religious communities. Within Christianity, marriage became a “sacrament” only in the early 12th century. Moreover, not every religious community or Christian denomination considers marriage a sacrament today. Those that do include: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and some branches of the Anglican Communion.

Do ministers “marry” people? No. In both Catholic and some Protestant traditions, the ordained minister is not the one who “marries” the couple; the two partners are themselves the ministers of the rite and the ordained clergy functions only as a witness to the couple’s vows of commitment. The Christian tradition has various views of who does the actual “marrying”: it can be the couple themselves, God, or the community as a whole, but it is never the minister.

Can same-sex couples currently get “married”? Yes and no. Same-sex couples may currently participate in religious rites of “marriage” in a number of faith traditions, including both Reform and Marriage Equality and Religion, page 3 Reconstructionist Judaism, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the Christian denominations of the United Church of Christ, the Metropolitan Community Churches, some Disciples of Christ (Christian), some Episcopal churches, and some Baptist churches. However, because the state will not currently issue a civil license to these couples, they are not legally “married” as far as civil rights and federal benefits are concerned.

What effect will civil marriage equality have on religious celebrations of marriage? Absolutely none. By extending marriage equality to lesbian and gay couples, the State will not nor can it say anything at all about whether a religious community chooses to bless same-sex couples with liturgical rites. Religious communities can choose to offer liturgical blessings of same-sex couples or not; the state has nothing to do with those decisions.

Doesn’t the Bible support marriage as a union between one man and one woman? Not really. The primary familial pattern in the Hebrew Scriptures is polygamy – one husband with multiple wives. The sexual ideal in the Christian Scriptures is chastity and celibacy. Jesus was even critical of the institution of marriage, suggesting that those who wished to be worthy of the resurrection “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:35).

But doesn’t the Apostle Paul endorse marriage? Not quite. Paul affirms that marriage is not a sin, but stops short of endorsing marriage as a laudable choice. Paul never says marriage is for the sake of children, or for pleasure, or even for companionship. For Paul, the only reason to marry is to provide a remedy for lust and encourages his readers to remain as he is, presumably unmarried.

Hasn’t Christianity always supported the importance of marriage? No, it has not. Unlike the positive regard in which marriage was generally held in the “pagan” Greek and Roman cultures in which Christianity developed, early Christianity itself demoted the institution of marriage in favor of celibacy. It is only in the medieval world and especially in the development of Protestant Christianity during the 16th century that marriage was re-constituted as an important Christian institution.

Should religious communities support the right to marry in this country? Yes. The right to civil marriage in the United States has absolutely nothing to do with the religious and spiritual meaning of marriage. It does have everything to do with social justice. Religious leaders and communities have been on the forefront of every movement for social change in this country; the freedom to marry should be no different.