

**The Marriage Debate  
in the PCUSA**  
- W P Campbell

*The definition of marriage will be one of the most significant topics to be debated at the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s upcoming General Assembly, June 30 to July 7, 2012. Commissioners, pastors, church officers and church members should be well informed about this topic and pray for an outcome that honors God and Scripture. W.P. Campbell, a PCUSA pastor and author of Turning Controversy into Church Ministry: A Christlike Response to Homosexuality (Zondervan, 2010), was recently interviewed on the topic. His responses are summarized below.*

**Debates about sexuality and marriage seem to be consuming the church. Why?**

Unfortunately, debates about sexuality have become central in the church for decades – in our denomination for more than 30 years. The flow of the public debate within the PCUSA has morphed from a softened position on sexuality (1991), to a long and relentless battle over the ordination of practicing homosexuals (1992-2010), to the current push to allow for gay marriages in our churches. Our denomination is not alone in this struggle between Biblical norms and cultural relevance. Unfortunately, the dynamic tension is breaking down in our denomination by cultural accommodation. Attempting rightly to show love to everyone God sends our way, we have compromised aspects of the truth and the redemptive nature of the Gospel.

**Isn't it unloving toward gays and lesbians to be against same-sex marriage?**

It may seem that way, but it need not be so. Historically, a significant number of gays and lesbians have been against the effort to legalize gay marriage. A person may in fact stand against gay marriage because of his or her love for gay people. I personally have gay friends and care for gay people, yet I do not support the effort to redefine marriage.

**Does not much of the confusion around this debate arise from different interpretations of the Bible?**

Yes, if we are speaking about the debate within the church. Much of the conversation centers on select themes in the Bible rather than the balanced perspective of the whole. Many have championed the cause of “justice” and sidestepped the Biblical call to holiness. This is an easy trap for Christians to fall into as God has wired us to be compassionate. We must not minimize, twist or ignore major portions of Scripture in our efforts to show grace to others, however. For example, the Biblical model of the covenant of marriage has become tarnished, trampled and all but trashed by much of our church and society. Thus the high rate

of divorce, adultery and promiscuity among heterosexuals, and now the push for same-sex marriage are all symptoms of our real problem – our diminished commitment to the covenant of marriage as defined by Scripture.

**Please clarify the last statement. Are you suggesting that we need to reclaim the covenant of marriage as heterosexuals before we have a right to speak against gay marriage?**

I'm saying that if we had been faithful to the covenant of marriage as given to us by God, gay marriage and the other alternatives to the creative norm would not be so quickly considered as alternatives. We heterosexuals need to clean up our act, and to point the way forward on this matter with humility as members of a society that is laden with sexual brokenness. The endorsement of gay marriage by church and society may only compound our problem, however.

**It is not easy to stand against gay marriage. After all, is not this a “justice” issue? And if so, how can we ignore the offer of equality in marriage for all?**

Throughout most of the history of the world, marriage ran its course free from the strictures of church or state. This illustrates what we tend to forget: marriage is not, at the core, a legal issue. It is as ancient and natural as the human race, and it has always reflected the male-female union. Natural marriage has been the foundation of every society since the beginning of the world. If we were created asexual beings, marriage would look very different. We cannot change the nature of marriage with our votes and arguments. God made us male and female, complementary pairs with balancing hormones, drives, emotions and physiological aspects that create two natural parts of a whole.

When we make matrimony strictly a legal entity and argue for equality, we minimize the true meaning of marriage. It is a sacrament, not a right. It reflects the eternal purpose of God as reflected in the creation. For this reason, New Testament authors and Christ Himself refer back to the creation account when teaching about the covenant of marriage. Gender differentiation and complementation reflect the wondrous plan of God to eternally unite Christ and the church.

**If this is the case, how do you respond to the person who encourages gay marriage based on “civil rights?”**

Civil rights strike at the core of our national values and at the heart of God's purpose for our lives. All people are created equal. The unsettled question, however, is whether or not gayness is truly inborn. Racial differences are immutable, based on genetics. Same-sex attraction, on the other hand, has never been demonstrated to be innate. Genes create traits, and at most influence behavior. Even the American Psychological Association, which has been heavily influenced by a politicized concept of sexual “orientation,” acknowledges the multifaceted causalities behind

same-sex attraction. Of course, everyone has the right to participate in marriage as it is now defined. And the law does not prohibit two people of any gender from loving and caring for each other. Marriage, however, is not legally based on whether or not people love each other. The union between one man and one woman has been promoted by legal systems since the Reformation because of the stabilizing and procreative nature of marriage.

**Let's make this practical and personal. What would you say to a gay couple who have been together for 25 years and now have children? Why should they be denied the right to marriage?**

This is a difficult issue. The gay couple you describe are blessed to be in a country that, no matter which state they live in, already grants them more rights than most nations in the world. Even as we deal with such painful topics, we can be grateful for the freedoms and protections already given to every citizen in this great country. We can love and care for our neighbors and for all the couples in our land without redefining marriage. The question before us is, do the gay couples with children, less than 0.2 percent of our population, have the right to change the nature of marriage for the remaining 99.8 percent?<sup>1</sup>

**But I have heard that marriage provides 1,000 benefits that are currently denied to gay couples in states that have not legalized gay marriage.**

The "1,000 benefits" phrase has become a convenient political handle, much like the "10 percent of the country is gay" statement. These handles are not well connected to reality. The 10 percent figure was drawn from Kinsey's 1948 estimate that 10 percent of males "were more or less exclusively homosexual for at least 3 years," based on a poor statistical sampling. Kinsey, known as the "Father of modern sexology," actually recognized a fluid model of sexual adaptation that none of the gay-rights advocates would dare to touch today. It doesn't work politically. Regarding gay marriage, the primary benefit cohabiting gay couples are not able to secure through contract or court order is a tax break. Interestingly, there are 7.5 million cohabiting heterosexual couples in our country, more than ten times the total number of gay households, married and cohabiting.<sup>2</sup> These heterosexual couples too are living as though married and yet miss benefits including the tax break. In both cases, the government is fulfilling its responsibility to establish laws to provide benefits based on what it deems best for society as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey, shows that less than 20 percent of same-sex couples are raising children, and there are approximately 115,000 same-sex households with children, and a total of 594,000 gay households.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

**Really? What harm would it cause the preponderance of heterosexual couples in our country to allow the relatively small number of gay couples to get married?**

Gay apologists have long held that if gay marriage is legalized, homosexuality will be normalized in our country. They are right. And as this new value system permeates all levels of our culture, it will marginalize people who embrace traditional Christian values. A redefinition of marriage will reshape our society. We have seen in Europe and Canada that once gay marriage was legalized, those opposed to same-sex matrimony lost their freedom of speech on this issue. In Canada, those who contest gay marriage may face up to two years in prison. In the United States, the impact of the legalization of gay marriage in several states has already been significant and far-reaching. The ramping up of pro-gay sex education in the public schools, the closing of Catholic adoption agencies, and the restrictions of rights in businesses, legal professions, schools, and nearly every sector of society has been (or likely will be) felt in these states over time. Not surprisingly, such trends are especially apparent in Massachusetts, the first state to approve same-sex marriages (in 2004).

**What about Christian ministers who preside in states that have legalized gay marriage? Must not the church give them permission to perform gay marriages to protect such ministers from lawsuits?**

If a minister denies marriage to a gay couple in a state that allows such marriages, the minister is best protected by a denomination that maintains policies not allowing same-sex marriages. The minister has the right to refuse and can defer to denominational policy as a protectant. Any gay couple in such states would still have the freedom to visit civil magistrates or ministers who support same-sex marriage for their marriage licenses. For a denomination to approve gay marriages under the guise of protecting its ministers, however, would be for that denomination to take away protections from every minister who is not convinced that gay marriage is best for our society.

**Will not entire denominations then be subject to lawsuits if they do not support same-sex marriage?**

There is no reason to assume this to be the case. In fact, Christian denominations in nations where same-sex marriage has been legalized, including Canada, Europe, and Scandinavia, are still allowed to maintain a Biblical stance regarding homosexual practice. The question we must ask, however, is, "If the church does not provide guidance for a culture that is losing its moral compass, who will?" We should not make denomination policies around what is expedient, but rather based on what is right.

**So you believe that the legalization of gay marriage can hurt our society?**

I'm suggesting that a redefinition of marriage will harm families and eventually society as a whole. The overwhelming majority of studies confirm that children do best when raised by both a mother and a father.<sup>3</sup> There is significant evidence, however, showing that same-sex marriages are less stable than heterosexual marriages. In Norway and Sweden, for example, where gay marriage has been legalized since the 1990s, gay male relationships are 50 percent more likely to break up than heterosexual marriages, and lesbian relationships are 167 percent more likely to break up than heterosexual marriages.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, studies show that gay individuals, on average, are more prone to depression, anxiety, mood and substance-use disorders and suicidal thoughts or plans, even in countries such as the Netherlands, one of the most gay-affirming environments in the world.<sup>5</sup> Does not the story of the Netherlands show us that even when homosexuality is supported, it is not devoid of negative consequences for the person so engaged? Statistics alone do not tell the entire story, but they can be indicators of significant trends.

**How do you respond to comments such as, “The church needs to catch up with the culture on issues of justice and equality?” and, “Is not gay marriage a natural next step for denominations that have excused divorce and embraced the ordination of women?”**

A variety of Bible-believing churches and Christian leaders throughout history have supported women in church leadership. Likewise, most Christians have long recognized that the Scriptures allow for divorce in certain circumstances. For 2,000 years of church history, however, the church has recognized Scriptural mandates against homosexual practice. Unfortunately, Christians haven't been as careful to follow the Biblical mandate to care for all people, including those who experience same-sex attractions and who are quietly part of our congregations. That is why I have written and created resources around this complex topic.

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<sup>3</sup> A recent comprehensive survey described in the journal, *Social Science Research*, indicates that children normally fare best when raised in households with their married, biological parents. See: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610).

<sup>4</sup> G. Andersson, T. Noack, A. Seierstad & H. Weedon-Fekjær (2006), “The demographics of same-sex marriages in Norway and Sweden,” *Demography*, 43, 79-98.

<sup>5</sup> T. G. M. Sandfort, F. Bakker, F. G. Schellevis & I. Vanwesenbeeck (2006), “Sexual orientation and mental and physical health status: Findings from a Dutch population survey,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 96 (6), 1119-1125.

**You have spoken much about Christians. Do you believe those outside the church should oppose gay marriage also?**

My primary concern is about the response of the church to this difficult issue. However, I believe that even if the Bible were removed from the discussion, a realistic study of cultures and history and natural law would be justification enough for those outside the church to stand in support of “traditional” marriage. For example, in his work, *Sex and Culture*, J.D. Unwin studied 86 cultures spanning some 5,000 years and found that the most prosperous and enduring cultures were those that maintained a strong marriage ethic. It may also be insightful to think about the results of our acceptance of no-fault divorce in 1970s and 1980s. It was pushed through court systems with the thought that it would not do any long-term damage to our country. Divorce has been shown now as a primary cause for poverty and crime. Do we really want to enter into another social experiment because of the pressure felt by political activists?

**If you had a final statement about the whole marriage debate, what would it be?**

Simply this: If Christians will not stand up for the Biblical model of marriage, what hope is there for our society? It is time that we stand up, speak out, and lovingly support what God has sanctioned.

*W. P. Campbell is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, N.C. For resources related to this article, see [ChurchReflections.com](http://ChurchReflections.com).*