

ON CHANGE IN THE MARRIAGE CANON

“Marriage” in its inception had only to do with relationships. The point of the relationship was procreation. Procreation was about survival in the margins for most, about politics and economics for the fortunate few.

The bigger issue is attitudes about homosexuality in general. If societal norms are procreation-focussed, then, homosexuality is bound to be regarded as deviant in most cases, although there are societies which do not regard it in this way. But, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which we are dealing with here, it is a sin and an abomination in the eyes of many. Marriage, therefore, would not even be a question for this point of view.

The OT abounds with testimony to this point of view. It is the OT that is most often adduced to castigate those of more liberal view point, and those who belong to the homosexual community. The OT is a stunning example of how the cosmic principle/energy we call “God” is adduced to support cultural norms.

God has nothing to do with marriage per se.

I do not recall anything in the NT extolling the virtue of heterosexual marriage as a topic of discussion. This would be, of course, motives of the NT writers aside, because heterosexual “marriage” union was the norm. One can speculate what Jesus himself would have made of a request to discuss this. Being a creature of his culture, one can assume he would have had difficulty with it, which is not the same as to say that he would have judged homosexuality harshly. That might well have been incompatible with his general message of tolerance and love. He might at least have encouraged forgiveness among those who did judge harshly, both for themselves and for the folk being judged.

Enter theology, full-blown organized religion (the tie that binds), its institutionalization (social control). The rest is history. While the forward movement of these things accomplished much good, part of that good was not always the message and mission of Christ. As do all human institutions, the church has as often as not sought to serve itself first, and function as moral policeman to its people imposing sanctions and controls that it’s hard to believe Christ would have had less trouble with than with the supposed “sins” committed by offenders. “God” continues to be referenced as the judge and arbiter of the errant.

Ecclesiastical law and the Canons of the Church of England and its colonial offshoot to a large extent enshrine a “legalistic” approach to simple social practices (in addition to regulating routine institutional church life).

At the Council of Trent in 1563, “marriage” first came to be recognized as one of the seven sacraments, a recognition that early Protestantism did not share. Bishop Cranmer first articulated the bones of the marriage ceremony as we have come to know it. Interestingly enough, in the 1604 version of the Canons marriage is said only to be between “Persons” (but we know what he meant).

The Canons of the Church of England (seventh edition) continue to speak of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. I suppose one could research when and why the wording changed. The point is that the Canons of the “mother” church remain unenlightened about the basic premise of what it is to be a Christian, that is, to love one another. The love here is conditional. At present, same-sex

couples who wish to marry, and who deeply believe in Christ and his message and mission, cannot receive the sacrament and affirm their faith at the same time as they vow to each other unless they obey the ``club rules`` which, of course, they cannot at present do.

The whole point of this maundering treatise is that the Canons, prescriptive as they are, seem at odds in this case with the basic message and mission of Christ as I understand it.

There is only one precept to live by and that is the Shema Israel, a version of which we speak every week:

Hear, O Israel!

The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment.

The second is like unto it:

Love your neighbor as yourself.

On this hangs all the law and the prophets.

We cannot appropriate the energy or force we call God to ends that do not treat our neighbors as ourselves.

From this point of view, organized institutionalized religion stands in the way of meaningful actualization of the schema.

If the Canons have any real relevance, they cannot instruct clergy to fly in the face of the above.

If theology is a concern, then, perhaps a gloss could be attempted such as reverting to the 1604 reference only to ``persons``.
