

“Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.”

1 Peter 4:8

Love Covers a Multitude of Sins

In my first appointment as a student local pastor, I received a frantic phone call from a bride-to-be and her fiancée who had just picked up their marriage license packet from the courthouse. They were just a few weeks away from their big day and unexpectedly in need of an officiant. In the state of Colorado, they were legally allowed to sign their own marriage license, but the moms of the bride and groom nixed that idea, “You’re not marrying yourselves!” The couple then planned to have the groom’s uncle, a deacon at his church in Florida, perform the ceremony.

However, when they picked up the license, they learned her uncle was not legally allowed to officiate marriages in Colorado. When they sought help from their church, their pastor refused to marry them because they already lived together. She explained all this to me in a panicked rush and finished with, “Oh. I almost forgot, do you own a Hawaiian shirt? The whole venue is decked out in a luau theme, and we were hoping - if you could marry us - that you could wear a Hawaiian shirt.”

I did have a Hawaiian shirt, and I was happy to marry them - my first of dozens of marriages of couples who lived together or were involved sexually with each other before marriage. I also marry couples who have been divorced, despite Jesus’s instructions in Matthew 5 about divorce and the historic positions of the church against both of these situations for marriages in the church. I do this because I believe that within the boundaries of sacred marriage (love, fidelity, commitment, and mutual support), God’s grace is offered. It would be ideal that everyone abstained from sex until they were married. But within sacred marriage, intimacy that would otherwise be sinful is offered a covering of grace.

While sex before marriage may not be the ideal for God’s design of the world, I believe that through marriage the church has the authority to offer a gracious second chance on behalf of God. And I believe that this opportunity places a couple on a path to discovering the goodness that God intends for us in marriage - its delights and its challenges. A pastor marrying a couple who have been active sexually or who have been divorced does not guarantee that they will build a healthy marriage with their second chance. But by God’s grace, it offers that opportunity in the best way available to them.

By now you’ve most likely heard that the UMC’s position on marriage was changed in April 2024 at a meeting of the General Conference. This essay offers an explanation for

how and why, Biblically and theologically, this change was made. First, I will discuss how the General Conference has the authority to make these decisions for the Church. Then, I will share some of the context behind the Bible's bans on sexual activity between persons of the same sex. Last, I will offer a theological reflection on the new United Methodist position on marriage between "a man and a woman or two consenting adults" as just such a gracious second chance. My intent in this essay is not to tell you how you should believe but to share some of the practical factors and Biblical and theological considerations that may help shed some light on why this decision was made.

How did the General Conference make this decision?

The General Conference is a gathering of nearly 1,000 United Methodist delegates from around the entire world. It is tasked with a number of Church law-making responsibilities, including setting the rules for ordination and church-sanctioned marriage. As the voice of the denomination, it also speaks for the church through statements like the Social Principles, a collection of positions on many of the issues facing people of faith around the world today such as abortion, gambling, and war. Since 1972, the United Methodist Church had held the position that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," and had maintained specific bans: (1) preventing clergy from performing marriages between persons of the same sex and (2) limiting anyone who is married to another person of the same sex from holding leadership and clergy roles within the church.

General Conference delegates engage in prayer, discernment of the Spirit's guidance, and Christian conferencing to consider any proposed changes to our rules. Change is often slow and deliberate. We saw this at the most recent meeting as decades of discussions, prayer, and discernment came together as changes were considered to the church's positions on marriage. But how can the church authorize a change to one of its sacred practices like marriage? To answer this question, it's helpful to look at a Biblical model for making these kinds of decisions - a process called binding and loosing.

Through binding and loosing, an appropriate religious authority (in Jesus's day, it was the Rabbis and teachers of the law who comprised the religious court, the Sanhedrin) taught God's people how to apply God's law to their lives. A teacher in Jesus's day might say, "You have heard that it was said 'you may not wear garments of wool and linen' but I say 'you must not wear any linen at all,' or 'wool and linen are concerns of the outside and God looks on the heart.'" This kind of language perhaps sounds familiar; Jesus is quoted teaching God's law this way in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48) and when he allows his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath in violation of the ten commandments (Matthew 12:1-3).

Jesus gave this authority to bind and loose to his disciples, as recorded in Matthew 16:19 – “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Often we interpret this passage as referring to God forgiving those whom we forgive, but that’s only one aspect of the authority that Jesus was passing on to his disciples.

The Apostles took up this authority in Acts 15, when a group of leaders of the early Church gathered with Paul, Peter, Barabas, and the Apostles to consider what non-Jews would be required to do in order to join the movement. Some contended (Acts 15:5) that including gentiles without requiring them to submit to circumcision would be a violation of God’s law (Leviticus 12:3, Genesis 17:4, etc).

At this gathering Paul argued, and Peter ultimately agreed, that God could be seen at working by the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles, bringing them to faith without circumcision despite God’s commandments, and that the church shouldn’t add burdens to those whom God had called to salvation. They did not argue that the Bible was wrong, simply that they had seen God at work in a new way that required consideration from the council.

The Spirit led this council - through prayer, discernment, and conferencing - to place no unneeded burdens on those whom God had called to the church. Likewise, as our authorized gathering of leaders, the General Conference uses prayer, discernment, and conferencing to guide United Methodists in living faithful lives in the ever-changing world in which we live.

Sexual Prohibitions in the Bible and the Art of Bible Translation

It may surprise you that the word “homosexual” is relatively new to Bible translations. It was coined as a term in the late 19th century and then didn’t appear in Bible translations for another fifty years. So, the Bible has been translated into English for about 500 years, yet for the first 420 of those years, the term “homosexual” did not appear in the translations. To understand why, let’s look at a few of the terms, in context, that the Bible does use and that have most recently been translated as “homosexual” in English and their context.

The two most common types of sexual activity between persons of the same sex mentioned in the Bible are temple prostitution and non-consensual sex to exert dominance over another. In the ancient world, sexuality was a part of worship in some pagan cults - a means of honoring or capturing the attention of their deity. In those traditions, the temples where these gods were worshipped might offer male and female prostitutes. This practice was explicitly forbidden in Deuteronomy 23:17-18, using the terms *qadash* and *qadasha* to describe male and female temple prostitutes. “Homosexual” is a misleading translation for

qadash, as it's specifically describing temple prostitution. It's possible that *malekoi*, another of the New Testament terms that I believe are mistakenly translated as "homosexual," means "male prostitute" as well (Palmer 62). It's easy to understand why prostitution would be sinful regardless of the sex of those involved, as it falls outside of the boundaries of sacred marriage.

The other Greek term translated as "homosexual" is *arsenokoitai*. It appears that Paul may have coined this term as a compound word, since the New Testament is the first place we see it used. And the New Testament does not use the common Greek words for gay or lesbian persons. Instead, Paul uses this compound Greek word that most scholars (including Martin Luther in his translation of the Bible into German) now connect with older men misusing boys or young men for sex (Palmer 64). As early as the 4th Century, church father John Chrysostom used the term *arsenokoitai* in this latter way as well (*Homilies on Titus* 5).

This helps us to understand why Ezekiel 16:49-50 tells us that the sin of Sodom that caused its downfall was a lack of hospitality to its neighbors - and not homosexuality, as is often taught. Compare what happened at Sodom in Genesis 19 to a parallel event in the book of Judges, chapter 19. In both cases, sojourners find a hospitable home in an inhospitable place (Sodom in Genesis and pre-Israelite Jerusalem in Judges). In both cases, the men of the town demand that the foreigners be let out so that they can sexually abuse them. In Genesis, Lot then offers the townspeople his daughter, but his guests, the angels, intervene and protect his family. In Judges, the host's concubine is offered, and she is afforded no such divine protection.

Using sex to dominate foreigners - including male prisoners of war and female slaves taken in conquest - was a somewhat common practice in the ancient world - (Palmer 33). When the ancient Israelites heard the prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 20 banning sex between men, or when early Christians heard Paul's letters, it's possible that they would have understood these prohibitions as banning temple prostitution and men raping other men who had been taken prisoner in war, not homosexuality as we know it today.

They didn't have any concept of committed, consensual sex between persons of the same biological sex and certainly no reference for a committed, monogamous, mutually supportive relationship like a marriage between two men or two women in the 21st Century. Even if God had tried to tell them about this, none of those who penned the Scriptures or heard them would have understood the concept of a committed relationship between two consenting adults who were of the same sex. It would be like God trying to tell Bronze Age Israelites that someday the lottery would be sinful.

If you're interested in studying more about the Bible and human sexuality, I would recommend God's Word on Human Sexuality: It's Not What You Think! by Rev. Dr. David Palmer, 2019. I appreciate the clear way he addresses these sensitive matters, and I think you will find helpful analysis in his book.

A Theological Basis for the United Methodist Position on Same-Sex Marriage

Did you ever notice that the Bible doesn't explicitly condemn gambling? Yet many Protestant denominations, including Methodists, have forbidden gambling for the financial harm that addiction to gambling can do to people. Likewise, the Bible doesn't permit, forbid, or even discuss the concept of a marriage relationship between two persons of the same biological sex. The people to whom the Bible was addressed would have had no reference point for such a relationship. In fact, many of the marriages that do appear in Scripture share little similarity with marriage today. David's multiple marriages, Jacob's two wives and two concubines, and many other examples of marriage in the Bible are nothing like what many today believe is the ideal of holy matrimony.

When the Bible doesn't directly address something that we encounter in the modern world (e.g. social media, gambling, or the debate between clean vs. traditional energy), Christians apply the values and principles of Scripture and our faith to help us determine how we will live. In this last section, I will share one key insight from the apostle Paul's discussion of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 that caused me to rethink my view on marriage as it is practiced by the Church.

You might be surprised when you read the complete thoughts of Paul on marriage. His ideal is not marriage and raising children, as we often hear in Christian circles. Rather, Paul sets as the ideal that Christians should remain unmarried and celibate (1 Cor. 7:1, 7-8). Since few can live with that ideal, Paul advises that marriage is a better option than facing (and possibly succumbing to) endless sexual temptation. Even for those who may experience divorce (1 Cor. 7:15), he offers permission that all who are tempted in singleness can receive God's grace and remarrying or choosing to abstain.

By God's grace, marriage relationships can offer us the opportunity to love and be loved by another – to experience support, intimacy, and stability through fidelity and commitment. Without sacred marriage and its boundaries, many of us could experience short-term or harmful relationships that don't offer support or stability, despite our willingness to give ourselves so completely to another in sexual intimacy. We are seen more fully, both physically and emotionally, by our sexual partners than anyone else. In his essay on human sexuality, Archbishop Rowan William called this "The Body's Grace," by which we find "a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen

in a certain way: as significant, as wanted” (Williams, 3). Without the covenant of marriage, intimate relationships would often be a source of harm to our soul. However, within the marital boundaries of commitment, fidelity, mutual support, and self-giving love, intimacy can be a source of emotional health, healing, and even spiritual growth and grace.

But what if a marriage between a man and a woman doesn’t live up to all of the ideals of mutual support and love? Does that invalidate the marriage in God’s eyes? What if two persons of the same sex have a relationship that is committed, monogamous, intimate, and mutually supportive? Could that relationship be beneficial to them in taking a step closer to God’s ideal for marriage and sexuality? Couldn’t the gracious covering over sin that is offered to heterosexual couples who remarry after divorce or who have lived together before marriage be provided for two consenting adults of the same sex?

The Spirit-led action of the General Conference authorizes just such grace. After years of prayer, debate, and discernment, the Church has loosed the practice of marriage to include the possibility of marriage between a man and a woman or two consenting adults. God has been at work in marriage in a new way, inviting our consideration. Within the bounds of mutual love and support, fidelity, intimacy, and commitment to one another, the goodness of God is found and there is a covering of God’s grace. Love covers a multitude of sins.

Works Cited

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