

Is gender complementarity essential to Christian marriage?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

With the movement to legalize same-sex marriage, much discussion has centered on what defines marriage. Some have argued that marriage is an unchanging tradition. Historically, however, this is simply not accurate. The U.S. definition of marriage, for example, has changed radically over the centuries. This is especially so for women, who have suffered the most from traditional definitions. In colonial times marriage was an economic and political arrangement between families. For centuries in the South it was a legal privilege only available to whites. One of the most enduring traditions of marriage has been the husband's right to his wife's body, which only changed recently when the marital rape exception was removed in the 1980's. And these examples are only the beginning. The meaning of marriage has changed over time, even in the relatively short history of the United States. And changes have typically enhanced the moral character of marriage.

Opponents to gay marriage, however, would say the real unchanging requirement for marriage is gender complementarity – the idea that men and women are different from one another in essential ways, and that Christian love depends on the pairing of just those differences. “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” as the expression goes. Since Scripture can be made to support both sides of the debate, it is useful to think about the implications of this notion that a covenant relationship can only be made between two persons of different genders. Not only does gender complementarity require male and female, it means that without these two halves, there cannot be a whole. As a model for human wholeness, gender complementarity is a dangerously exclusive one. On its terms a person who devotes his or her life to service of God – Jesus, Paul, Mother Teresa – is only half of a person, i.e., is not fully created in the image of God. To be sure, a man and woman are necessary for biological procreation. However,

Protestants eliminated procreation as the defining purpose of marriage in the 16th century.

Another implication of gender complementarity – that there are fixed natures for masculinity and femininity – is also troubling. To begin with, this notion too is historically inaccurate. Just as the definition of marriage has changed, so have accounts of masculinity and femininity. Early Church Fathers defined women’s nature as less rational and more easily corrupted than men’s. By contrast, domestic images for U.S. white women at the turn of the century represent them as naturally more spiritual than (white) men. Accounts of male and female natures have always differed according to a subject’s race and class position in society. An African-American woman in earlier centuries was expected to drive mules and pick cotton. Seen as a natural-born breeder, not a mother, her young could be sold just like animals. Her white upper-class counterpart, by contrast, was cast as a spotless, pure mother, fragile and in need of protection.

The identification of nurturing and relational skills with females may seem intuitively true. Centuries of assigning childrearing to women have enabled many

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women to develop the skills that support human development. However, as historically caused rather than biologically essential traits, capacities to nurture, to love and support the young are traits that Christians should covet for their male children as avidly as for their female. Dividing up these traits not only idealizes stereotypes to which few people actually conform, it refuses to honor the unique gifts and potential of each child of God.

Then there is the problem that few people actually fit the idealizations. Countless boys and men have internalized images of what it means to be a “real man” that they are never able to live up to. A boy who is smart in math and science (as opposed to poetry and social work) will be lauded in our culture. A boy who prefers classical music to football, who is diminutive in size, or who would like to care for children, however, will inevitably be labeled a “sissy.” By insisting upon gender complementarity, his church will continue to underwrite his fear that he is not a “real man.”

Speaking of embarrassing failures to “measure up” to gender complementarity ideals, there is Jesus. On complementarity’s terms, the Biblical portrait of Jesus of Nazareth makes him something of a misfit. Having never married, he would have been only half a person. Several of Jesus’ character traits

are typically “female” – caring compassion, strength in weakness, and sacrifice. These images have so worried gender complementarians that more than once in U.S. history they have attempted to rescue Jesus from “effeminate” representations. “Muscular Christianity,” a turn-of-the-century movement, remasculinized Jesus by imaging him as a red-blooded and virile, manly man – the opposite of a wimp. More recently Promise Keepers insist upon calling Jesus a “Tender Warrior” to keep his style of caring from sounding too feminine. But if Jesus doesn’t fit our notion of what a man should be, we would be better off broadening our understanding of gender roles than trying to change the story of Jesus.

If cultural definitions of maleness and femaleness cannot be essentialized, neither should the match of male and female sex organs be taken as proof that God only blesses heterosexual matings. Biologists now know that there are not just two kinds of people. The so-called “natural division” of humanity into those with XY sex chromosomes and those with XX is no longer accurate. Over 5.5 million people on the globe are not “male” or “female” according to these chromosomal patterns, and many of them cannot be defined by genitalia. To ignore such science is akin to agreeing with Aristotle that women are physiologically misbegotten males.

But what about complementarity *without* sex/gender essentialism? By balancing one person’s strengths and weaknesses with those of another, complementarity can truly enhance Christian marriage. It means that differences harmonize, not that only certain differences are allowed (I Cor.12-13.) An outgoing personality in one partner might be complemented by the analytical skills of his shy partner. Rightly understood, complementarity suggests that differences can function to supplement and enhance, not divide people.

Jesus never defined sexuality. Indeed, his singleness, admiration of eunuchs (Mt.19:12), and admonition to give up family (Lk.11:27f) are good grounds to call the heterosexual nuclear family arrangement into question. However, Jesus does call us to God’s radical vocation of love. This vocation requires honoring the unique gifts of every person. It calls us to repent of this new form of “works righteousness” where I must be a “real woman” married to a “real man” in order to be saved.

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