

Understanding the Christian Defense of Same Sex Marriage

FEBRUARY 2024

Purpose

- ▶ The purpose of this presentation is to present the Christian Defense of Same Sex Marriage in an easy-to-understand way.
- ▶ After the union of the United Brethren in Christ with the Methodist Church, forming the United Methodist Church in 1968, homosexuality was first openly debated at the General Conference in 1972. This debate resulted in the following addition to the Book of Discipline:
...the church “does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”
- ▶ Based on this statement, same sex marriage has not been permitted in the United Methodist Church. Now, over 50 years later, the United Methodist Church is considering removing this statement from the Book of Discipline.

Purpose

- ▶ **QUESTION:** How is this possible? Has our understanding of Scripture changed?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** Yes. The issue of homosexuality, like other significant societal issues the church has addressed in the past, has forced a re-consideration of same-sex attraction and same-sex marriage.
- ▶ The following slides demonstrate, that by following the rules of scriptural interpretation, *as demonstrated by Jesus*, we can confidently make the Christian blessing of marriage open not only to heterosexual couples, but to same sex couples as well.

What is Marriage, anyway?

- ▶ Marriage occurs in cultures and religious traditions around the world. There are a variety of different perspectives on the nature of marriage.

QUESTION: What is the distinctively Christian understanding of marriage?

ANSWER: Christians understand marriage as a “school of holiness”. In other words, marriage is an instrument that God has made available to us to grow in our capacity to love God, love ourselves, and love others.

- Marriage trains us in a very particular kind of love: a dedicated love, a lifelong covenant of body and soul with another person.
- Ask anyone who is married.... marriage is not easy. This is one of the reasons why marriage is an effective “school of holiness”. Marriage guides us to be faithful, less selfish, loving, kind, forgiving... and more tolerant.

What is Marriage, anyway?

▶ **QUESTION:** What does the Bible say about marriage?

▶ **ANSWER:** The Bible identifies three different reasons for marriage:

1. Marriage is for procreation. In Genesis, it is clear that God intends Man and Woman to procreate and populate the Earth. But procreation is not the one and only reason for marriage. We know that many marriages are not blessed with children, intentionally and unintentionally.

2. Marriage is a 'fence against sin.' In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul understands that some men and women can be consumed by lust and passion. And for those people, he had a simple solution: Get Married!

1 Corinthians 7:9

9But if they cannot control themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. 10 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife....

What is Marriage, anyway?

3. What does Jesus say about marriage? In Mark, the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce. Jesus replies...Marriage is so **two can become one**.

Mark 10:1

*1Then Jesus left that place and went into the region of Judea, beyond the Jordan. Again the crowds came to Him and He taught them, as was His custom. 2Some Pharisees came to test Him. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" they inquired. 3"What did Moses command you?" He replied. 4They answered, "Moses permitted a man to write his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away." 5But Jesus told them, "Moses wrote this commandment for you because of your hardness of heart. 6However, from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 7'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, 8and the two will become one flesh.' **So they are no longer two, but one flesh.** 9Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."*

If we look at these three reasons for marriage, can we point to one that is the most important? Yes. What is important to Jesus? That two people become one. No longer two, but one flesh.

Same Sex Marriage

QUESTION: Can same sex couples enjoy the blessings of marriage? That is, can the union of two people, regardless of sexual orientation, be made sacred and inviolate by a vow before God?

ANSWER: Yes. We can **BELIEVE** and can **AFFIRM** that the school of holiness of marriage is open to both homosexuals and heterosexuals.

- ▶ Homosexuals (same-sex attracted people) just like straight people (heterosexuals), are capable of dedicating themselves, heart and soul in a covenant relationship over time in an exclusive way until they are parted by death.
- ▶ In this way, God is able to work in every life so dedicated and increase personal holiness. This is the foundational claim of why Christians should recognize and celebrate same-sex marriage alongside marriage between men and women.

Objections to Same Sex Marriage

- ▶ **QUESTION:** But doesn't the Bible say that marriage is between a man and a woman and that sexual activity between people of the same sex is condemned?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** Yes. These are important objections, and they are not taken lightly. Let's review these issues closely.

Question: How should we interpret scripture?

Answer: We should use Jesus as our Guide. How does Jesus interpret the Law?

How does Jesus interpretate the Law (Scripture) ?

- ▶ **QUESTION:** How does Jesus interpret the Law (Scripture)?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** Jesus provides clear examples of interpretation that we can follow:
First, When a weightier matter of the law is in conflict with a lighter matter of the law, the weightier matter of the law takes precedence.
Second, An historic rule of law can be contextualized, subjected to a more fundamental divine purpose and then superseded.
And what is the **WEIGHTIEST** matter of the law? The Great Commandment.

Following the Example of Jesus (1)

▶ 1. How did Jesus interpret the issue of divorce?

In Mark, Jesus changes the traditional law of divorce by appealing to a more fundamental framework of love. He actively demonstrates how an old law can be out of touch with a new reality that places love at the center of our actions. **With these words, Jesus supersedes the Old Testament.**

*3 “What did Moses command you?” he replied. 4 They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” 5 “**It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,**” Jesus replied. 6 “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’[a] 7 ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,[b] 8 and the two will become one flesh.’[c] So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mark 10: 3-9)*

NOTE: The first three Gospels do not agree on exactly what Jesus’ opinion was. The Gospel of Mathew includes an exception to the prohibition to divorce.

Following the Example of Jesus (2)

▶ 2. How did Jesus interpret rules related to the treatment of our enemies?

In Matthew, Jesus changes the traditional law of “eye for and eye” and replaces it with “love your enemy”. He actively demonstrates how an old law can be out of touch with a new reality that places love at the center of our actions. He appeals to the golden rule and love of God and love of your neighbor. **With these words, Jesus supersedes the Old Testament.**

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’^[h] ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (Mathew 5: 38-42)

Following the Example of Jesus (3)

- ▶ 3. How did Jesus interpret rules related to working on the Sabbath?
In Mark, Jesus challenges the Law by healing on the Sabbath. He actively demonstrates how an old law can be out of touch with a new reality that places love at the center of our actions. **With these words, Jesus supersedes the Old Testament.**

3 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. 2 Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. 3 Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." 4 Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. 5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. 6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mark 3: 1-6)

What is the United Methodist Tradition of Scriptural Interpretation

- ▶ **QUESTION:** What is the United Methodist Church's tradition of understanding faith, scriptural interpretation, and church doctrine?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** One way to think about this is through the lens of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral:
 - ▶ 1. Scripture
 - ▶ 2. Tradition
 - ▶ 3. Reason
 - ▶ 4. Experience

So, while Scripture is the PRIMARY source and standard for Christian doctrine, it is not the only source. Therefore, these four elements, taken together, can bring us to a mature and fulfilling understanding of the Christian faith and the required response of worship and service.

In short, Christian faith is dynamic, not static; it evolves just as human knowledge and understanding of the world is evolving.

What is the United Methodist Tradition of Scriptural Interpretation

- ▶ **QUESTION:** If the New Testament is the PRIMARY source and standard for Christian doctrine, how should we read, interpret, and understand Scripture?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** One way to think about Scripture is to understand that “Scripture” is not a book. “Scripture” is a person. That person is Jesus Christ. We strive to imitate Christ, not the text of the New or Old Testament, and to imitate Christ is to try to figure out what it means to fulfill the Great Commandment.

(Matthew 22:35–40)

35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Examples of Modern Interpretation

- ▶ We have examined three different ways that Jesus demonstrated how an historic rule of law can be contextualized, subjected to a more fundamental divine purpose and then superseded.
- ▶ **QUESTION:** Are there example where the modern church has taken a similar action and followed the example of Jesus Christ?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** Yes. Let's review three examples.
 - ▶ Slavery
 - ▶ Ordination of Women
 - ▶ Divorce

Examples of Modern Interpretation: The Horrible Practice of Slavery

16

- ▶ **QUESTION:** Was the Bible used to justify slavery?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** Yes. There was a time when the Bible was used to justify slavery. It is quite easy to do. There are many passages that describe the responsibilities of owner and slave.

Yet today, we can all say with one voice that slavery has no role in modern society. Even though scripture can be found that defends slavery, **the modern church has superseded that scripture** as contrary to the love of neighbor as oneself.

Examples of Modern Interpretation: The Ordination of Women

17

- ▶ **QUESTION:** How did we get from a clear prohibition of women speaking in the church to the point where we fully accept women as clergy and leaders in the church?

Women are to be silent in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35If they wish to inquire about something, they are to ask their own husbands at home; for it is dishonorable for a woman to speak in the church....(1 Corinthians 34-35)

ANSWER: We used the law of interpretation that Jesus used. Jesus demonstrates that when a weightier matter of the law conflicts with a lighter matter of the law – then the weightier takes precedence.

For many years now, we have accepted, despite clear prohibition by scripture, that women, just as well if not better than men, have the gifts and charisms necessary for public ministry. Even though scripture can be found that silences women, **the modern church has superseded that scripture** as contrary to the love of neighbor as oneself.

Examples of Modern Interpretation: Divorce

18

- ▶ **QUESTION:** Jesus speaks very clearly about divorce and says: *“Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate”* (Mark 10:9). How has the modern church evolved over the issue of divorce?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** Over the last several decades, society (and the modern church) has come to accept that there are many valid reasons for divorce. And more importantly, the modern church has come to understand that remaining married, in an abusive relationship, can be unhealthy, dangerous, and sometimes even fatal.

The modern church has accepted, despite clear prohibition by scripture, that divorce can be the most compassionate course of action. Even though scripture can be found that prohibits divorce, the modern church has superseded that scripture as contrary to the love of neighbor as oneself.

Examples of Modern Interpretation: Homosexuality / Same Sex Marriage

- ▶ **Finally, let's use these examples and apply the same rules of interpretation to the issue of Same Sex Marriage.**
- ▶ **QUESTION:** How can we bless Same Sex Marriage when there are passages in the Bible that appear to condemn this activity?
- ▶ **ANSWER:** We used the law of interpretation that Jesus used. Jesus demonstrates that an historic rule of law can be contextualized, subjected to a more fundamental divine purpose and then superseded.

By following the Great Commandment, we can make Marriage, a 'School of Holiness' available to not only heterosexual couples, but to same sex couples as well.

Even though scripture can be found that condemns same sex sexual activity, **we can supersede that scripture** as contrary to the love of neighbor as oneself.

The Christian Defense of Same Sex Marriage

- ▶ In summary, the Christian Defense of Same Sex Marriage is as follows:
 1. Can a heterosexual person live in the light of Jesus Christ? **Yes.**
 2. Can a same sex attracted person live in the light of Jesus Christ? **Yes.**
 3. Can a man and a woman, under the blessings of marriage, pledge a life of love to each other and to God? **Yes.**
 4. Can a same sex couple, under the blessings of marriage, pledge a life of love to each other and to God? **Yes.**

The Christian Defense of Same Sex Marriage

► In conclusion:

The Christian defense of same sex marriage argues that it is time to follow the example of Christ, and that when a weightier matter of the law conflicts with a lighter matter of the law – the weightier matter takes precedence.

It is time to modify the Book of Discipline and allow everyone who pledges to uphold the church with prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness -- an equal seat at the table.

The Christian Defense of Same Sex Marriage

- ▶ Compiled By Jonathan H. Soulen
- ▶ With loving guidance from:
 - ▶ R. Kendall Soulen, Professor of Systematic Theology at Candler School of Theology, Emory University.
 - ▶ Richard N. Soulen, Professor of New Testament (Ret.) at The School of Theology, Virginia Union University.
- ▶ For more theology discussion, please visit our podcast:

Soulen and Soulen - Letters to the Inquiring Mind on
Theology and Scripture

<https://soulenandsoulen.com/>