

Two Reflections on Same-Sex Marriage

I. Same Sex Marriage: A Sacramental Unity

by Ched Myers and Bill Wylie Kellermann

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In 1963, William Stringfellow—Movement theologian, *Sojourners* mentor and gay man—had the following to say about mainline churches who were pondering whether to join the struggle for African American civil rights:

The issue here... is not some common spiritual values, nor natural law, nor middle axioms. The issue is baptism. The issue is the unity of all humanity wrought by God in the life and work of Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of that unity of all human life in God.

We hear these words anew in the present moment in light of the contemporary public debate over same sex marriage.

Events in recent months have highlighted same sex marriage as an issue of full inclusion in both church and society. We receive this as a kind of *kairos* moment for Christian disciples, particularly those like ourselves who enjoy heterosexual privilege (including the rights of marriage), to act in public solidarity with gays and lesbians, particularly those in the faith, too long shunted to the margin.

Since, as generally practiced in this country, marriage uniquely intersects church and state, this issue raises the question of equal justice for lesbian and gay persons simultaneously in both spheres. With respect to the state, marriage is a legal contract bearing a whole range of rights and obligations to which gays and lesbians should rightly expect equal access and equal protection. With respect to the church, marriage is a sacramental act, a covenant of grace, a vow of fidelity witnessed before God and community. Gay and lesbian Christians called to marriage need and deserve ecclesial resources of blessing and support to fulfill their commitment.

Many good folk will be tempted by what Stringfellow called “middle axioms,” specifically recent attempts to preclude marriage for gays and lesbians while allowing “civil unions.” This position stops well short of full civil rights, echoing ominously the old “separate but equal” logic. More importantly, it hedges on the full inclusion of lesbian and gay Christians in the faith community, limiting their access to pastoral resources and the full sacramental life of the church - not to mention suppressing their gifts and ministries. It is such exclusion that threatens the meaning of our baptism.

Biblically, baptism signals commitment to the discipleship practice of Jesus,

including communion and solidarity with “the least,” the marginal and the excluded. It names the one humanity forged in Christ’s flesh, where the “dividing wall of hostility” has been broken down, abolishing the “laws and traditions” which have separated us (Eph 2:14f). It embodies that new reconciled human community.

The transformative power and practice of baptism suggests that our churches would be leading the way to justice through full inclusion of gay and lesbian people. Obviously, however, this has not been the case. But neither was it with respect to the struggle for racial justice and inclusion about which Stringfellow wrote. This painful legacy ought to instruct us regarding the present issue, since constraints on marriage were also fundamental to American apartheid. Under chattel slavery, African Americans were forbidden marriage and so developed alternative rituals, such as “jumping over the broom,” to mark their extra-legal covenants. And it was not until a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1967 that mixed race couples were guaranteed marriage rights!

Just months’ after Stringfellow’s remarks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his letter from the Birmingham City Jail. He was responding to the “moderate” pastors who had publicly named him as an extremist and identified his ongoing Civil Rights campaign as “untimely and unwise.” Fully half of that famous epistle is devoted to King’s anguished love for the church and his grave disappointment in those “more committed to ‘order’ than to justice.” He embraced the charge of extremism, joining himself with the company of Amos as an extremist for justice, of Paul as an extremist for the gospel, and of Jesus as an extremist for love.

The same dynamics are now in play regarding civil and ecclesial marriage rights for lesbian and gay citizens and disciples. We believe that it is not enough to recognize in hindsight that the exclusions of the past were “obviously” wrong; we are called to practice foresight into a future where “liberty and justice for all” is fully realized. Faith is, after all, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

The real issue once again here is baptism--and the discipleship and inclusive justice that flow from it.

II. Splitting the Difference? Same-Sex Marriage as a Justice Issue

by Ched Myers (April, 2004)

I. The Context

Over the last couple of months we have witnessed an extraordinary historical opening, not to mention an eruption in the public discourse, concerning the issue of same-sex marriage. A dramatic shot over the bow was the remarkable “civic civil disobedience” by the county of San Francisco, which began issuing marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples on Feb 12th, inspiring several other counties around the country to follow suit. Thousands of licenses were issued, including

one to David Knight and his partner (Knight is the son of CA Republican State Senator Pete Knight, who in 2000 authored Proposition 22, which defined marriage as being solely between a man and a woman). This breach of the heterosexual monopoly on marriage was closed exactly one month later by the California Supreme Court, which issued an interim stay directing officials to stop allowing same sex marriages until the issue can be reviewed by the courts. In the midst of the kaffuffle, President Bush announced that he would support a Constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage.

Meanwhile, on the opposite coast, a political environment of stunning ambivalence has been shaping up, in which the State Legislature is seeking to “split the difference,” banning same sex marriage while approving civil unions. The 3/31/04 *Boston Globe* reported the following result:

The Massachusetts Legislature voted yesterday to ban gay marriage and establish civil unions, approving a proposed constitutional amendment that would reverse the Supreme Judicial Court's historic ruling that legalized same-sex marriages. Governor Mitt Romney immediately vowed to ask the court to block gay marriages until voters can decide the fate of the dual proposal in November 2006. The SJC decision legalizing gay marriages is set to go into effect May 17, and Romney said he wanted to avoid confusion that he believes would result if gay couples married and then the voters banned gay marriage. Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly, however, said minutes later that he would not take Romney's request to the SJC. Reilly said he believed that Romney lacked a valid legal basis for a stay, because the SJC has ruled twice in favor of gay marriage. The SJC ruling would make Massachusetts the first state to allow gay couples to marry. The proposed constitutional amendment, on the other hand, would ban gay marriage but make Massachusetts the second state, after Vermont, to legalize civil unions that would provide the same state rights and benefits available to heterosexual couples through marriage. The Legislature narrowly approved the amendment, 105-92, after the fourth intense day of debate in the past six weeks.

So the political battle is pitched, heading into presidential election season, with Republicans lining up behind an amendment, and Democrats (including candidate Kerry) mostly aping the Massachusetts Legislature's waffling doublespeak.

Clearly, this issue is not going to go away. Many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered activists (hereafter LGBT) would not have chosen the battle over marriage, or this particular moment, to define and direct their struggle for equal rights. But social movements often are decisively impacted by developments that activists did not anticipate. And indeed, as a result of recent events, it appears that same-sex marriage will be the lens through which the real issue—full equality in church and state—is viewed.

I believe this moment calls on those of us who enjoy heterosexual privilege (including marriage rights) to demonstrate an unprecedented measure of solidarity

with LGBT persons, particularly sisters and brother in the faith. This battle is not only deeply consequential for the church and nation as a whole, but also for millions of real persons trying to live and love without discrimination. This is not, as our colleague Melanie Morrison insists, merely about a “culture war”; it is a fundamental matter of human justice and liberation.

The pundits are squawking, but this issue does not lend itself to sound-bytes. For this reason I offer below a few “talking points” that might help those looking for a place to stand in the shifting terrain. I have no illusions that conservatives who are ideologically committed to heterosexism will be persuaded by my arguments, of course. Nor are they needed by those who already affirm the rights of LGBT persons to full equality. Rather, these thoughts are specifically aimed at the arguments of those who purport to offer a “middle ground” in this debate, while preserving their heterosexual monopoly on marriage—usually for vague cultural and/or religious reasons. It is the kind of remarkably fuzzy thinking that has led to Massachusetts double-dealing.

This position imagines it can not only split the difference between marriage and civil unions, but also split off those who are “different,” excepting the LGBT community from the logic of civil rights as it has been embodied in decades of struggle in this country. Such equivocation is, sadly, attractive to many who have not wrestled through the issue, or who are insulated from its consequences. This is why I believe that persons of faith and democratic conviction must clearly support the legitimate demand of the LGBT community to finally be welcomed as full members of church and society. And why I have oriented these theological and political comments toward those who “hedge” about whether this truly is a justice issue.

I wish to acknowledge up front that reasoning alone does not do justice to the real suffering and hopes of those whose lives hang in the balance on these public debates. Indeed, I believe that *relationships* with LGBT folk are ultimately far more persuasive than mere arguments in helping heterosexual persons and groups to clarify their thinking and feeling on this issue. Still, because I have been getting requests for some perspective, I hope the following might be useful. I am grateful to two Michigan friends (Bill Wylie Kellermann, a straight Methodist theologian and aforementioned Melanie Morrison, a lesbian UCC minister) for their help in thinking through these concerns.

II. *Is the Bible any help on this issue?*

I ask this not because of my lack of confidence in the scriptures, but in recognition that when it comes to reading the biblical material regarding LGBT issues, the terrain is highly conflicted, as are all the hermeneutical angles. I won’t attempt to address this well worked-over ground here; all the basic arguments on both sides (including mine) have been made elsewhere with varying depth and breadth. I’ll simply make a few brief assertions about my own biblical convictions (and I’m happy to provide background to how I arrived at them for the interested reader).

- 1) Of all the traditions in the Hebrew Bible, the Levitical codes appear to be pretty hard on homosexuality. It can certainly be argued that these codes should not be held to be “normative” for contemporary Christian ethics, since there is much in the Purity Code that has been set aside or rejected (I recommend the funny yet thoughtful parody found on the web: www.godhatesshrimp.com/). But I always worry that such an approach easily degenerates into a Marcionist tendency (where Christian liberals impugn the Old Testament and take refuge in the New). I think instead we ought to read Torah through the lens of the prophetic tradition (in somewhat the same way Christians read the Hebrew Bible through the lens of Jesus’ life and death). And the prophetic tradition is clear that we are to practice compassion with vulnerable members of the community.

Moreover, the prophets envisioned an ever-widening circle of communion. Melanie Morrison, for example, has shown that Isaiah 56 anticipates a time when *despised sexual minorities* such as eunuchs “who join themselves to the Lord” would be welcomed in the “house of the Lord.” The fact that Jesus cites this very oracle in his dramatic Temple action (Mk 11:17) suggests that it was a vision that deeply shaped his struggle with the leaders of his own tradition around issues of exclusion.

- 2) The N.T. says little, and perhaps nothing at all, about “normal” same-sex relationships (that is, non cultic or ritual homosexual relations). But I do not therefore believe that we need to rely on a theory of “progressive revelation” to construct a rationale for the inclusion of the LGBT community. Rather, I think this can *and should* be constructed on the basis of socio-historical analogy. The reasoning goes something like this:
 - Jesus explicitly called disciples to practice communion and solidarity with “the least,” the despised and the excluded in his social context (e.g. Mk 9:33-37, 10:43-45; Mt 25:31-46), and demonstrated this in his intimate social relationships with and advocacy for lepers, women, the unclean, the disabled, the demon-possessed, non-Jews, etc.
 - this *call* applies in any social or historical context, but the nature of the marginalized *groups* changes with the context, since cultural perceptions and the distribution of power changes through time and space;
 - sexual minorities today unarguably qualify as a structurally marginalized group, whether that is defined in terms of civil rights, general social acceptance or physical or psychological victimization.
- 3) For majority heterosexual Christians, I think the text that most clearly forbids any theological attempt to scapegoat, exclude or demonize the LGBT community is Jesus’ teaching that “nothing from the outside can make us unclean” (Mk 7). While a dominant culture (the “insiders”) may have the power to name minority cultures as “outsiders,” according to Jesus the latter does not have the power to harm or compromise the character of the former. The insiders’ *own* behavior alone determines its character. This is a profound

and deeply germane principle of communal and public ethics in the present debate.

- 4) Finally, any sort of categorical (e.g. “all homosexuals”) exclusion or segregation functions to reconstruct the very “wall of hostility” that Christ’s death tore down, as classically articulated in Ephesians 2. Such a theological position undermines the Christological mission to:
- welcome into the community those who “insiders” may have categorized as “aliens and strangers” (Eph 2:11f);
 - bring close those perceived as “far off” (2:13);
 - abolish any “laws and traditions” that separate us in order to “create one new humanity, and thus make peace” (2:15), thereby reconciling a *reconciled community* to God (2:16).

Any theological position that differentiates persons or groups on the basis of an *anthropological trait* is deeply problematic. Because of centuries of social struggle in church and society, we no longer accept such differentiation in the case of gender or skin color/ethnicity, nor do we any longer accept biblical rationales for such (despite the fact that these were considered “orthodox” in former epochs). On what grounds, then, do we accept it in the case of sexual orientation? I can find no biblical or theological justification for relegating an entire social group to a different “class” of citizenship in both church and society.

- 5) For those interested in navigating the voluminous literature, let me make just a few suggestions about generally reliable resources out there:
- Walter Wink’s brief overview “Homosexuality and the Bible” can be found on line at www.bridges-across.org/ba/wink.htm.
 - A long, thoughtful essay by evangelical theologian Jack Rogers, who changed his mind as a result of reassessing the biblical testimony, is available online at: <http://covenantnetwork.org/rogers4.html>.
 - Latin American liberation theologian Tom Hanks has written widely on this question, much of which can be accessed at www.othersheep.org/ (see particularly his essay at [/ellulsex_2.htm](http://www.othersheep.org/ellulsex_2.htm)).
 - Jeff Miner and John Connoley’s popular *The Children Are Free: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence on Same-sex Relationships* (Jesus Metropolitan Community Church, 2002) can be previewed at www.jesumcc.org/bookstore/free.html.
 - Three recent “fora” featuring thoughtful biblical scholars with differing viewpoints and approaches can be found in:
 - i. David Balch (ed), *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2000);
 - ii. Dan Via and R. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress Press, 2003); and
 - iii. an exchange between William Herzog III and Manfred Brauch found at www.bridges-across.org/ba/herzog-brauch.htm

- One of the most exhaustive annotated bibliographies of the Bible and homosexuality I've found on line was compiled by Jeramy Townsley: www.jeramyt.org/gay/gaybib.html.
- *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* by John Boswell is the classic work on the history of homophobia in Christendom.

In short, the Bible can and must be our ally in the current struggle, but we must be clear that any attempt to employ it in solidarity is subject to becoming mired in the dizzying labyrinth of contested interpretations (of the Right *and* the Left). Though no particular readings are conclusive (nor in fact can they be in a living tradition), it is important not concede a “draw” in the hermeneutical battles. We must continue to read the “Word Out” (as Chris Glaser would put it), while always mindful of the hateful ways in which the scriptures have been placed in the service of exclusion. The sheer weight of that legacy should bow us, but not break us.

III. *Civil rights, Ecclesial Wrongs*

The platform that seems to be emerging among those who profess to be “moderates” on the same-sex marriage question argues that society’s extension of “civil and human rights” to the LGBT community should be affirmed, but that the “traditional” position of the church (or the political culture) needs no paradigm shift. Let me address the ecclesial question, then the Constitutional one.

The logic that bifurcates “civil” and “ecclesial” rights has long been familiar as the position of the Roman Catholic Church regarding women and the priesthood. That is, it’s OK for women to fully participate in society, just not in the ministry of the Church. The problem is not that this position posits a fundamental difference between matters of church and matters of state; American citizens and Christian disciples should both affirm this distinction, if for different reasons. Citizens, for example, have an interest in constraining the ability of any one religious group to impose its beliefs or practices; and Christians have an interest in constraining the ability of the State to limit their discipleship practices.

The problem is how this distinction intersects with basic human rights. It is true that American society will always be more pluralistic than the American church—indeed, than *any* particular community of conviction and practice. But the issue with same sex marriage (like with women in the Catholic Church) is one of *discrimination*, not pluralism. How can Christians call with integrity for non-discrimination in civil society if we reserve the right to discriminate in our churches?

The closest parallel that comes to mind is the way in which many Southern white churches during the Civil Rights era contended that *even if civil society mandated integration*, they would never allow “race mixing” in their churches. Their argument was that churches were “private” institutions based on religious values and

traditions that the State should not meddle with. Koinonia Farms founder Clarence Jordan battled with several Southern Baptist congregations in Georgia concerning precisely this logic, which he was as a betrayal of the gospel. Today some Christians would work within that same framework on the issue of same-sex marriage, insisting that even if the State sanctions it, the church should not. (For a thoughtful but finally specious argument *for* the moderate position on the grounds of religious freedom, see Misty Irons' "A Conservative Christian Case for Civil Same-Sex Marriage," found at www.musingson.com/index.html).

Such thinking betrays the church's vocation to be a leader in the struggle for human liberation, and diminishes its character by stipulating that not all hard-won civil rights should apply in its special moral universe. It seems to me that Christians should advocate for an ecclesiology that stipulates exactly the opposite—namely, that the church should embrace marginalized persons and groups *regardless* of what the dominant culture says.

This raises the real issue, which is *how LGBT folk are treated in the community of faith*. Obviously there are many churches that refuse any sort of communion with "avowed, practicing homosexuals." Many others simply ignore them or render them invisible ("don't ask, don't tell" was the functional policy in many churches long before the Clinton administration adopted it for the military!). Then there are churches that support "almost full" inclusion—LGBT members have access to every sacrament *except* marriage. In this case, a separate, non-marital "commitment status" with special liturgical ceremonies has been developed, in some cases in defiance of ecclesial hierarchies.

Yet these special services, if they do not constitute a "real marriage," simply reproduce the aforementioned logic of the Vatican regarding women: equal status *except* for what's most sacred. Moreover, supporting same-sex "unions"(civil or religious) is disingenuous unless it also advocates for equal access to *all* the structures of communal, sacramental and civil support that *any* couple needs to live out their fidelity to one another. (I am setting aside here the thorny theological issue of what the relationship between the church and State should be in the sanctioning of marriage). Of course, heterosexuals have amply demonstrated that marriage laws and customs do not guarantee fidelity or "healthy families." And in the absence of civil or religious support, LGBT folk have long been inventing such structures on their own. It is simply a matter of equal opportunity.

Conservative logic here is particularly duplicitous. Not to support same-sex marriage is to leave the LGBT community orphaned on the very issue conservatives claim to value most, namely "committed relationships" and strong families. This has led to the traditional, vicious and circular reasoning that uses stereotypes of LGBT promiscuity to deny them the very social supports that help couples resist promiscuity! Opposing this contradiction, David Brooks wrote recently in the *New York Times* in support of same-sex marriage: "Faced with the contemporary marriage crisis, we conservatives should do everything in our power to move as many people as possible from the path of contingency to the path of fidelity" (found at: <http://www.law.ucla.edu/~williamsproj/Ideas/power.html>).

But quite apart from ecclesial equivocation, the secondary status of civil unions for LGBT citizens is incoherent from a rights perspective. If civil unions *do* offer all the legal privileges and protections equivalent to those provided by State-sanctioned marriage, why would the State bother with the distinction? If civil unions do *not* offer everything that obtains to marriage, on the other hand, then they do not constitute full civil rights. This is precisely the position of the county of San Francisco: the State Constitution declares that “a person may not be...denied equal protection of the laws.” (The upcoming State Supreme court deliberation on this matter will be interesting: twice in 25 years it has ruled that the State Constitution protects homosexuals against discrimination, yet six years ago ruled that the Boy Scouts could legally exclude gays!)

Meanwhile, of course, a proposed federal Constitutional amendment precluding same-sex marriage, supported by powerful Conservatives such as Robert Bork and George Bush, is gaining momentum. Predictably, it is gaining widespread support from the religious Right. Regrettably, there is also considerable support from the Black church—perplexing in that such an amendment would represent a return to the bad old days of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, when federal law was used to *restrict* rather than to *expand* civil rights.

(Apropos, Black Conservative Shelby Steele has made a desperate attempt to “split off” the LGBT community from the civil rights legacy: “Gay marriage is...not a struggle for freedom. It is a struggle of already free people for complete social acceptance” (found at www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110004846). He then goes on to make the extraordinarily ridiculous claim that “racism was evil because it projected a profound difference where there was none—white supremacy, black inferiority—for the sole purpose of exploiting blacks. But there is a profound difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality.” Apparently Steele has forgotten the elaborate ideological justifications for anthropological *difference* that characterized most of the history of race relations in America; or the fact that biological difference has continued to be the rationale for gender discrimination right up to the present.)

Most “moderates” (though not in Massachusetts) will likely reject the strategy of a Constitutional amendment as too problematic to the tradition of rights. But they are still missing the point. The great thing about Civil Rights logic, as it has been embodied in both social movements and most legal precedents in this country over the last half century, is that the struggle for *some* rights inevitably expands into a struggle for *equal* rights. Moreover, full rights are envisioned for *all minorities*, not just some—no matter how small a percentage of the population (LGBT persons are more numerous than Native Americans or Koreans, but should that even matter?). If any exceptions are to be made to equal rights, according to this logic, they should be in the area of “affirmative action” programs that would *support* the minority group having to navigate hostile social structures. How then can so many so quickly abandon this tradition when it comes to the LGBT community?

IV. *Deconstructing slippery appeals to “tradition”*

In the absence of firmer grounds, proponents of the exclusivity of heterosexual marriage often make highly charged, if vague, appeals to “tradition” to justify their position. This invocation is basic to the Right’s cosmology and rhetoric, and when unchallenged tends to be very persuasive in the public discourse, particularly to “moderates” who haven’t really thought through the issue. After all, when the matter is framed in a way that suggests that same-sex marriage is messing with a nearly cosmic and sacred tradition, few wish to take it on. But it is completely specious once we scratch the surface of the argument.

Tradition is another name for a canonized *majority practice*. While it is important to reckon with culturally, it should not be equated with a universal anthropological phenomenon, though it often is in the present debate. Majority “norms” in any given cultural arrangement are always socially constructed; “customary” behavior is always historically relative. Even in the case of the biblical injunction that a “man leave his parents to cleave to a woman” (Gen 2:24), the ways in which this “divine institution” is *actually expressed* in the Bible vary greatly. Many of these cultural forms of “marriage” (concubinage, Levirate marriage, virginity laws, etc.) would be objectionable from the perspective of the modern marital model.

Sociologically speaking, our “normative” paradigm for marriage and family is no older than six generations, dating from the Victorian era. It certainly bears no resemblance to kinship structures in biblical times, nor is it recognizable to cultural practices that have prevailed through most of church history. Louie Crew has pointed out, for example, that:

- For most of the Christian era, weddings were not held in churches;
- The formalities were much more about property than about affection and mutuality;
- The vast majority of people had common law marriages, as there was no real property; as late as the 16th century, Austria and Bavaria had laws banning marriage for servants and day laborers;
- Adultery, not marriage, was the norm of the Courtly Love tradition in the High Middle Ages;
- Marriage services, when they did evolve in the 12th-14th century, were modeled on monastic ceremonies that made vows of friendship.

In the American experience we could add that it was only after the civil war that Afro-Americans were allowed to marry in all areas of the US, and mixed race couples could marry anywhere in the country only after a U.S. Supreme Court decision *in 1967*.

Indeed, our definition of family has morphed significantly just in the last two generations. It is well within living memory, for example, that divorced persons were *excluded by our churches from the sacrament of (re)marriage*. Those who would defend the values of marriage, then, should at least bring some measure of

historical and cross-cultural analysis to the task, and stay away from sweeping generalizations. The church, for its part, should endeavor never to absolutize one cultural paradigm for marriage--particularly not one limited to the culture and history of Modernity.

Appeals to “tradition” are also problematic from the standpoint of Christian ethics. Just because something is a widespread or majority practice does not mean it is morally justified (i.e. war, overconsumption, prejudice, usury, adultery, etc.). On the contrary, disciples endeavor to follow gospel values whether or not they are embraced by entrenched institutions. The biblical prophets and Jesus were always holding deeply-rooted “traditions” to the bar of Yahweh’s justice and compassion (e.g. Is 58; Mk 7). Every movement of church renewal has challenged prevailing “norms” of church and society. And “traditions” of race, class and/or gender have often stood in the way of change in modern social justice struggles; when it comes to marriage, one thinks of the longstanding, dysfunctional traditions of misogyny and miscegenation.

Certainly Christians can affirm and support certain majority cultural practices (though it is remarkable how rarely the apostle Paul did so in his time). Today this would surely include heterosexual traditions of marriage and family, which deserve our support. After all, half of contemporary marriages fail in our cultural context, so they need our help. But support for a majority practice in no way obligates the church to absolutize them, much less to proscribe or preclude *minority* practices. Traditions are healthy only insofar as they are living, adapting, and open to revision.

The flip side of the argument from tradition is the specter of the alleged “threat” of same-sex marriage. The presumption (usually unstated) is of a sort of zero-sum, finite economy of fidelity: if gay folks are married, it will somehow undermine heterosexual marriage. No one can demonstrate how gay and lesbian people are responsible for the breakdown of the heterosexual family; it is pure prejudice, and vicious scapegoating.

Family breakdown is indeed a concern in our society. But family disintegration is fundamentally rooted in the structural forces of post-modern capitalism itself, which are at war with the family and *all* social relations of solidarity. The breakdown of kinship structures is more advanced in our society than in any other, and *how we interpret this phenomenon is crucial* if we are going to reverse the tide. We will never confront the way in which powerful economic forces relentlessly uproot, alienate, dislocate, commodify, and separate people if we are distracted by surrogate cultural arguments that vilify minority practices while romanticizing majority “traditions.”

V. “Moderation” vs. discipleship

For years the “culture war” over issues of LGBT inclusion has been vicious, generating more heat than light. All the mainstream Protestant denominations are divided on this question, and those that have taken modest steps toward inclusion are facing with schismatic movements of reaction. This ambivalence is widespread

in the culture more generally, which is why few politicians have been willing to take a clear position in support of same-sex marriage. In this highly polarized environment, some progressive folks are concerned that the same-sex marriage issue functions will distract attention from other pressing social concerns such as militarism and poverty. Others fear that pushing this issue may lead to even more reactionary initiatives from the Right. (Polls suggest that conservatives of all stripes may well unite over this issue, and scuttle any chance of voting out the Bush administration in November.) Thus there is a certain “tactical reluctance” among many to push this issue, a sentiment shared even by some LGBT folk themselves.

Such a context makes it even more tempting to posture as a “moderate.” Many heterosexual politicians, church leaders and pundits even imagine they can arbitrate the deep differences in the current cultural and political environment through a “middle ground discourse.” The problem is, this is done without acknowledgment of the power or structural privilege they enjoy as heterosexuals, *especially* around issues of marriage. Worse still, these folks routinely talk *about* LGBT folk “need” or “deserve,” but not *to* them or *with* them.

I believe that the issue of LGBT inclusion represents another chapter in the Civil Rights movement’s ongoing struggle for equal justice in American society. It is a crucial moment, and moderation will not do. I think the witnesses of two notable mid-20th century church leaders offer a crucial reminder here:

- 1) *Martin Luther King, Jr.* The struggle against racism was the primary “culture war” in the U.S. for a century and a half. King’s Birmingham jail letter, written to both white and black pastors, challenged “moderates” (i.e. those who had not taken a public stand on the controversial issues of integration in the South) to show courage and commitment in the face of popular opposition. He subsequently did the same thing regarding the Vietnam War. Today, as a result in part of two decades of effective organizing by cultural conservatives, and in part due to the traditionally conservative tendency of the great American middle, it is indeed politically risky to stand in unequivocal solidarity with those seeking the normalization of same-sex marriage. Will we take an unpopular stand, or wait until changes in social perception make it politically acceptable to join a movement for full inclusion?
- 2) *Dietrich Bonhoeffer.* During the rise of National Socialism in Germany, close on the heels of the first Jewish exclusion acts that were instituted by both State and church, Bonhoeffer’s sister became engaged to a Jewish man. She asked Bonhoeffer to officiate at their wedding, but he refused, judging it to be still too controversial within his own denomination, and too distracting from the other pressing issues he was trying to fight (he was, after all, the first German pastor to publicly challenge Hitler). Shortly thereafter, Bonhoeffer realized he had betrayed his own convictions and the humanity of his Jewish friends, and apologized profusely to the couple. He regretted forever after that he had failed to see the connection between the Jewish question and the Confessing Church. He subsequently authored some powerful pieces in which he asserted that the entire Christian rationale for resistance to the Nazi

Reich was predicated upon *whether or not the church would stand in solidarity with the Jews*. This part of his (and Niemoller's) thinking, interestingly, never did fully prevail in the Confessing Movement. Today we keep inventing new rationales for the old politics of exclusion.

These stories suggest that history is a hard judge on those who, because of political or religious "traditions" of the moment, resist the full inclusion of disparaged human communities into both church and society.

We can take heart that for all the polarization around, there are many examples of people of faith transgressing simplistic "right and left" paradigms in order to find common ground without giving up principle. There are evangelicals who are questioning the received wisdom about LGBT exclusion. And there are many compelling voices in the LGBT Christian community who are speaking strongly about (and modeling in their lives) the need for committed relationships and sexual fidelity. Both gay and straight folk are wrestling deeply and conscientiously with the whole spectrum of issues related to marriage, nurturing family, sexual ethics, etc. These kinds of voices will be more important to the public conversation than those trying to tip-toe a middle of the road path. (One group trying to construct a safe and fair conversation around this issue, including theological and biblical aspects, is www.bridges-across.org).

The struggle of LGBT sisters and brothers for justice and inclusion is far greater than the issue of marriage. But in this historical moment, the marriage issue is deeply consequential. It is a matter of justice and of discipleship, of integrity for the body of Christ and for the body politic. God's sacraments are a gift, and society's sanctions can be a good, and these belong to all the people.

Real persons have suffered as a result of Christians supporting (or refusing to denounce) deep-seeded prejudices in the past. But courageous voices of faith and conscience have also helped overturn these same prejudices, helping the prophetic vision of a "House for all peoples" to ever broaden its scope from generation to generation. Any of us can, in hindsight, see the exclusions of the past as "obviously" wrong. The challenge for us is to embrace the more difficult thing: foresight into the future of "liberty and justice for all."

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).