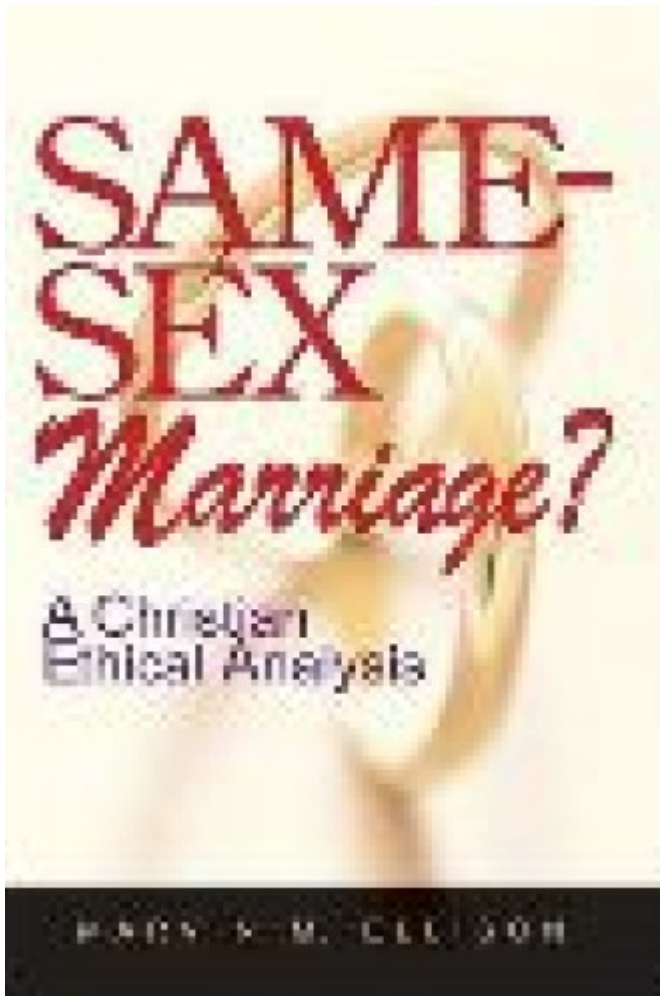


Just desires?

By [Joel James Shuman](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Same-Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis

Marvin M. Ellison

Pilgrim

Marvin Ellison introduces his treatment of same-sex marriage not with a consideration of the history or theology of the Christian practice of marriage, but

with a wide-ranging account of marriage law and social theory. Although this approach is not without merit, here it serves the purpose of calling into question the priority of all “traditional” accounts of marriage.

For Ellison, the compatibility of same-sex love with Christian discipleship is not in question; he insists on the “moral equivalence of gay and non-gay sexuality, of gay and non-gay love.” Reimagining marriage as a liberal institution legally and socially hospitable to people whose sexual preferences are other than heterosexual monogamy is his main concern. Whether or under what circumstances gay or lesbian Christians should be welcomed into the practice of Christian marriage is secondary.

Ellison says he is arguing from and on behalf of a “progressive religious perspective,” which “places justice making at the heart of (in my case, Christian) spirituality and views marriage, sexuality and family through a justice lens.” He defines justice as “seeking abundant life for all.” Seeking justice requires careful attention to the world, especially social practices and institutions that advance or disrupt human flourishing. It requires us “to empower disenfranchised persons and groups so that they may live as respected, participatory members of the community, empowered to pursue their own life projects.” The just society frees people to seek the fulfillment of their individual desires, including the desire to form and enjoy a variety of sexual partnerships.

According to Ellison, societies that restrict the fulfillment of desire are unjust—and, in this case, heterosexist. By “institutionalizing heterosexuality as the exclusively normative way to be human,” he claims, such societies devalue sexual difference and withhold from some members benefits enjoyed by others. Traditional marriage is the institutional face of heterosexism.

Advocates of traditional marriage insist that marriage is by definition a union of one man and one woman, a conclusion that makes “gender difference the core structure of marriage,” according to Ellison. Marriage traditionalists insist that this understanding of marriage simply reflects the way things are or ought to be; God created male and female as complements to each other. But, says Ellison, this insistence is simply part of a patriarchal social strategy that posits gender difference as prerequisite to gender hierarchy; this concept of marriage is simply part of a “male supremacist cultural paradigm . . . in which women’s lives are secondary and derivative in relation to men’s.” Opening marriage to same-sex couples, then, would

be an important step in overcoming patriarchy and creating a more just society for women as well as for gays.

Ellison does not bring his project into direct conversation with the Christian tradition until well into the book, and then primarily to note that Christian teaching has been detrimental to sexual well-being by virtue of its overarching deprecation of the body and negativity toward human sexuality. Christian teaching needs to be transformed to foster an “ethic of desire.” The freedom of sexual expression “can spark a wonderfully ‘wild desire’ for justice as rightly related community.” Ostensibly, persons free to express themselves sexually will be inspired to seek freedom of many kinds for others.

Although many of Ellison’s critiques of Christian teaching on sexuality and gender roles are justified, his account of the tradition is horribly attenuated. Not only does he overlook those strands of the Christian tradition that have seen sexual love as a gift from God and a good in its own right, he too easily dismisses Christianity’s long history of concern about the dangers of undisciplined desire. Ellison seems unmindful of desire’s destructive potential. At its best the Christian tradition has taught that, yes, desire is fundamental to who we are as humans, but given our sinful tendencies toward egotism, it needs to be reshaped by the careful work of discipleship.

What is most lacking in Ellison’s treatment is an adequate sense of the Christian community as a counterculture whose common life says something to the world at large about how God would have women and men live. Little consideration is given to the church as an *alterna civitas* with its own peculiar politics and practices, among which are marriage and celibacy for the expression and disciplining of sexual desire. Within such an understanding of Christianity there is room to acknowledge that every account of marriage is a somewhat fluid “socially constructed arrangement,” without acquiescing to Ellison’s insistence that all social arrangements are radically contingent and subject to infinite retooling in the service of “wild desire.”

The Christian account of marriage, like all of the practices of the Christian community, is developed and sustained by concern both for the way things are and the way they ought to be. That concern is not indifferent to human desire. But it interrogates and seeks to shape desire, based on the Christian conviction that God’s intent for all creation is revealed in the stories of Israel, Jesus and the church.

The question of same-sex marriage is thereby repositioned. The issue is not whether a society, if it is to be called just, must democratize the satisfaction of desire to include lesbians, gays, bisexuals and the transgendered. Nor, on the other hand, is it a matter of whether the legitimization of same-sex marriage will push Western culture and the traditional family into the abyss of dissolution. Rather, the issue is whether marriage, understood as one of the practices of the Christian community, can be adapted to include same-sex relationships and still properly be called Christian marriage—that is, a practice of discipleship that both forms and displays our faithfulness to the coming kingdom of God.

The undeniable faithfulness of innumerable gay and lesbian Christians, and heterosexual Christians' less-than-stellar past with respect to honoring their marriage vows notwithstanding, same-sex relationships are a radical departure from what Christians have traditionally meant by "marriage." To sanctify a relationship by naming it marriage is to say something about the capacity of that commitment to represent to the world the relationship between people in the kingdom of God. To the extent that the kingdom of God is to be a restoration and perfection of God's good creation, marriage also displays something of the character of embodied human life in a restored and perfected nature. A full exploration of the issue of gay marriage would need to consider the creation stories in Genesis, the biblical witness to God's intentions for humanity, and the meaning of gender difference in fulfilling that intention.