

Blessing Same-Sex Unions/What God Has Joined Together?

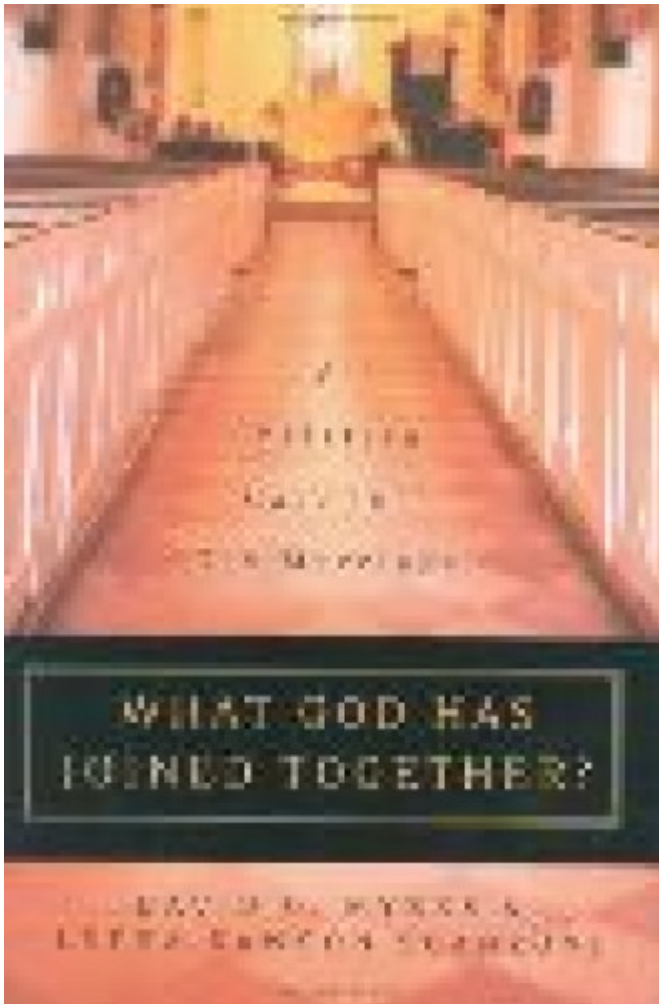
reviewed by [Craig L. Nesson](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage

Mark D. Jordan
University of Chicago Press



What God Has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage

David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni
HarperSanFrancisco

Two books, both arguing in favor of same-sex marriage, yet as different as can be! Mark Jordan writes in an often ironic tone. Why should gays and lesbians aspire to receive the church's blessing on their unions if heterosexual marriage is itself a charade in practice and theologically unsubstantiated? Jordan, a professor at Emory University, argues that Christian marriage is loaded with contradictions, having been captured by cultural notions of romance and the perfect wedding. He examines how such conventions have also come to influence the understanding of unions of same-sex couples. Documenting his case colorfully from both popular media and scholarly sources, he asks: If all that marriage entails is following the etiquette advice from a professional wedding planner, what is the point?

Jordan digs deep as he examines the historical and theological origins of Christian marriage. The chief contradiction involves the practice of polygamy in the patriarchal biblical narrative, which undermines later attempts to construct a Christian norm. And Jordan subjects theological arguments for marriage based on the New Testament to criticism based on the vagaries of the texts used to substantiate them. When one studies the historical manifestations of the interpretations and rituals of marriage, it becomes clear that they have been in constant flux. Jordan considers even the work of John Boswell and Alan Bray, who argue for some historical precedents for same-sex unions, to be of limited value for the construction of a contemporary rite.

The task of producing a foundational theology of Christian marriage and implementing that theology in marriage practice is an urgent matter not only for same-sex unions but for all marriages, Jordan contends. In the end he affirms that “Christian churches should bless same-sex unions,” but he makes his argument more by negating the confusions of straight marriage than by constructing a positive case.

By contrast, *What God Has Joined Together?* is strongest when David Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni are arguing for the virtues of Christian marriage and advocating that the same virtues be available to gay and lesbian couples. Myers, professor of psychology at Hope College, and Scanzoni, author of eight other books and editor for the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus, write in the idiom of the evangelical audience they seek to persuade. They honor opponents of gay marriage by taking very seriously the chief objections to greater inclusiveness for homosexual persons in the life of congregations. For example, they review the literature on the cause of sexual orientation and the possibility of changing one’s orientation, as well as familiar arguments based on the Bible texts regularly used in the homosexuality debate. While their conclusions favor greater openness, their style is more irenic than Jordan’s.

Myers and Scanzoni cite statistics that make a formidable case that marriage contributes greatly to human flourishing and the well-being of society. (These are the same statistics that Jordan calls into question as rationalizations for the “marriage movement.”) The authors are persuaded that civil unions for homosexual couples are insufficient. Rather, only the blessings of Christian marriage can bring the fulfillment that God intends for human lives. They call on liberals to advocate more forcefully for the value of marriage in general and ask conservatives to

recognize that the benefits of marriage can also contribute to genuine fulfillment in same-sex relationships.

In an appendix about “changing attitudes,” Myers and Scanzoni raise the question of whether we are in the midst of a paradigm shift toward greater acceptance of homosexuality and the possibility of gay marriage. Actions by denominations, such as those taken at the recent churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, can be subject to varying interpretations. On the one hand, that assembly soundly defeated a resolution (requiring a two-thirds majority) to change church policy to allow in exceptional cases the ordination of ministers in lifelong same-gender relationships. On the other hand, almost 50 percent voted in favor of allowing such exceptions, a surprisingly large percentage. At the same time, the ELCA passed a resolution allowing local pastors and congregations to discern appropriate forms of pastoral care—an existing practice that has in some places been interpreted as allowing for the blessing of same-sex couples. From within the flow of history it is very difficult to discern whether a paradigm shift is in motion or in the process of being checked.

Whether through ironic or irenic discourse, the authors of both of those books seek to foster the emergence of a paradigm that affirms gay marriage in the Christian church. While their arguments are substantially different, they agree that the case for the blessing of same-sex unions can be made only with a careful and thoroughgoing reclamation of the meaning of marriage itself, starting with the theology and practice of heterosexual marriage.