

Getting married in church

Colleagues,

In the ELCA folks are debating whether or not the church should “bless” same-sex unions. Some synods have urged that it be done. Our own congregation here in town has put the topic on the agenda for the Adult Education Forum during the month of September. On one of those Sundays I’ve been asked to lead a discussion about the Biblical view of marriage. Here’s my first draft. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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1. Getting married in church. Does marriage really belong there? I don’t think so.
 2. Nowhere in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Scriptures is there anything like a “church” wedding. Marriage is a secular event, a routine happening of everyday life in civil society. Nothing “churchy” (or temple-y or synagogy) about it.
 3. The same is true in the New Testament. That’s no surprise really, since the first Christians were Hebrews. The one instance of a wedding in John’s gospel where Jesus is present is not portrayed as a “religious” event at all. Jesus does no blessing of anybody. If he has any role at the wedding, it is that of an “emergency caterer.”
 4. If there is a “blessing” involved in marriages (I’m not sure there are any such texts in the OT; I’m quite sure there are none in the NT), we need to understand what “blessing” was in the OT. “Blessing” is godly activity,

sometimes with God as the subject of the sentence [God blessed Abraham], many times with humans as the subject, this person blessing someone else [Jacob blessing his sons at the end of his life].

5. The content of such blessings is vitality, health, longevity, fertility, and numerous progeny. All of them “this-worldly” benefits. None of them “spiritual,” theological, related to salvation.
6. Claus Westermann, big-name Lutheran OT scholar in the 20th century, showed the difference in the OT between God’s “blessing” work and God’s “salvation” work. Luther picked up this distinction with his metaphor of God’s left-hand work and God’s right-hand work. With the former God cares and protects our life on earth—that’s God’s blessing work. With the right-hand righteous relationships with God get restored.
7. I’m told (I haven’t checked the sources) that for the first thousand years in Christian church history there were no such things as church weddings. Marriage was understood to be a “secular” thing, something regulated by civil law. When the Western church began to call marriage a sacrament, it started to become “church-ified.”
8. The Lutheran Reformation said marriage was not a sacrament (=God’s right-hand work of salvation), but God’s left-hand work. So the reformers returned marriage to the secular/civil realm. That doesn’t mean god-less realm, but the realm where God’s left-hand agents and authorities care and protect human life on earth. Seemed obvious to the Reformers that marriage was not “churchy,” for it happens all over the world—where there are no Christians and thus no Christian church. God has always been involved in marriage in every society with his left-hand care and protection, but nothing “salvational” is involved. People don’t become righteous before God—or unrighteous—by

marrying or not marrying.

9. Even though it happens all the time today, it is at best “fuzzy” theologically to talk about a “Christian wedding, Christian marriage.” The participants can be Christian (Christ-connected persons) nurtured by God’s “right hand,” but the marriage itself is something in God’s other hand. And for that “other hand,” God has other agents in charge, viz., the civil magistrates. The work they do is God’s “blessing” work, even if they do not know that or may even deny it. Having a Christian pastor “do the ceremony” is really outside the jurisdiction of a “called and ordained minister of the Gospel.”
10. The most “Christian” way to view marriage is to see it in God’s left-hand realm. Even more in Biblical perspective, it is the “one-flesh” physical fact of sexual union that constitutes the marriage. The commandment against adultery does not create marriage, but presupposes that marriages are already on the scene and to this “given” it says: “Don’t break into someone else’s one-flesh union; don’t break out of your own. When you do that you are not fearing, loving, trusting God above all things.”
11. It is not the vows, the promises, the ceremonies, not even God’s “left-hand officers” blessing the partners, but the physical fact that makes a marriage. It is not the blessing that gives permission for one-flesh union. It is the one-fleshing that God’s left-hand agents regulate and approbate (aka “bless”). There is no commandment to marry or to refrain from marriage. God gets people married by implanting the sexual electricity that pushes them to do what comes natcherly. And in a fallen world, that “naturalness” needs regulation and blessing.
12. In times past the reality of the one-flesh fact called for eye-witnesses, outsiders to confirm that the marriage was indeed a fact, to wit, consummated. So regularly in

Medieval Europe the “first night” had folks around to witness that one-flesh-ness had actually occurred and that there was indeed a marriage between the partners. As bizarre as that seems to our romantic-love-saturated individualistic culture nowadays, that was the way Luther and Katie got married. John Bugenhagen, I think it was, and maybe other of their friends, stood by and watched to then verify that their marriage really happened.

13. To those getting married, who might even grant the left-handed (civil/secular) character of marriage, the question is: What do you expect to happen by having a “church wedding?” Important events of human life—graduations, daily work, signing a contract, getting a driver’s license, birthing a baby, adopting a child, buying a house, etc.—have no “churchly” ceremony to accompany them. Why marriage? Especially if it is not a Christian sacrament? Especially if it is God who has located it elsewhere?
14. So what are we talking about when we ask about the blessing of same-sex unions? Even if such unions can be godly—as I think they can—in God’s left-hand workings, what’s a “church blessing:” supposed to do? That is the question, seems to me. What can “the church,” its “minister of the Gospel” add to what’s already there? Is it to pray for the people involved? That can be done, and at our parish regularly is done, at the next Sunday’s liturgy.
15. Some folks have told me: since at present in the USA, few states give left-hand “civil blessing” to such unions, the church should do so, at least for the time being. Even so, is this the church’s jurisdiction when you start from the premise of God’s ambidextrous work in the world?

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