



An Open Question?

“Who shall forbid a wise skepticism,” asked Ralph Waldo Emerson, “seeing that there is no practical question on which any thing more than an approximate solution can be had? Is not marriage an open question, when it is alleged, from the beginning of the world, that such as are in the institution wish to get out, and such as are out wish to get in?”*

At one level Emerson was certainly correct. Rates of divorce and desertion remain high among “such as are in the institution,” but now there are increasing numbers of those “who are out” but “wish to get in,” not the least among them some gays and lesbians—and perhaps especially those who are Christian. Part of the reason, to be sure, is the social benefits that accrue to the married, but, to be fair, that is not the only rationale.

And so marriage has become a whole new kind of open question. What is it? What is it for? Who can “get in”? In a series of discussions around sexuality on the Luther Seminary campus a couple of years ago, both those who advocated the ordination of cohabiting homosexual candidates and those who opposed it agreed that the church would never be able to come to agreement on that question until it faced squarely the question of what it thought about marriage. If cohabiting homosexual candidates can be ordained, what of cohabiting heterosexual candidates? Or, does the opportunity of marriage for the latter put them in a different category from the former? But what of seniors (many of whom now also seek ordination) for whom marriage seems sometimes to stand in the way of public benefits? Whatever decisions the church makes in this arena, it seems clear that it will not be able to defend an outcome that requires of some of its candidates for ministry commitments that are not required of others.

To the degree that its definition and purpose has changed radically through the ages, marriage does indeed remain an “open question.” How long has the “traditional” view been traditional? Or was it ever? What changes are possible, if any, that do not effectively remove any meaning at all from the term? For now, open questions.

On the other hand, Adam’s response to Eve is not an open question at all: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). In that moment, the cool and objective skepticism commended by Emerson in “Montaigne” will not do, but only the sensual passion of poetry. Therein lies the rub. Social decisions about marriage must be made with dispassionate calculation about the greatest

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Montaigne; or, the Skeptic,” *Representative Men* (1850), in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983) 694.

good for the greatest number, where voices are appropriately cool, but the relationship celebrated in marriage is anything other than dispassionate, so voices will be fervently hot. Much is at stake, and people can get burned.

Some years ago my too-soon-gone former colleague Carl Volz preached a sermon on marriage in which he argued, contrary to the prevailing opinion of the day, that marriage is precisely a freeing institution. Only within ultimate commitment, he pointed out, can we dare truly to be ourselves with one another. Only within the firm “bonds” of marriage are lovers free to look like themselves and not like the commercials, to act like themselves and not like the manuals, to smell like themselves and not like the chemicals, and to give of themselves with no need of self-protection. Knowingly or not, Volz echoed the earlier thoughts of British poet and cleric John Marriott (1780-1825). In “How Marriage Is like a Devonshire Lane,” Marriott compared the confines of marriage to a narrow British country lane, so closely walled by flora that there is “no turning round”:

But thinks I, too, these banks, within which we are pent,
With bud, blossom, and berry, are richly besprent;
And the conjugal fence, which forbids us to roam,
Looks lovely, when deck'd with the comforts of home.

In very different contexts, Volz and Marriott both made an argument for the why of marriage over against those who saw it as a trap for men (Marriott’s day) or for everyone (Volz’s). Marriage sets us free, bringing, at last, joyful rest from the ever arduous quest of frantic conquests or the ever cool detachment of refused commitment.

The question today, though, is not why get married at all, or why stay “in” once “in,” but for whom this blessed freedom is meant. Who can be included in the joyful one-flesh union celebrated in Genesis? What decisions will best serve a stable and just society? For cool observers, perhaps, an open question. For passionate partisans, on either side, a case closed. There may finally be no decision that does not alienate some and split the church. But, one fervently hopes that such a “solution” is not adopted too quickly. The question needs to remain open at least long enough for people of good will on both sides to be truly heard (not to mention those in a variety of middle positions), and, more important, long enough for the Spirit to work in a way that might surprise us all.

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