

Stump the Pastor: One Gospel Fits All
Isaiah 43:18-21; John 8:1-8; Romans 14:1-13
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Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Our question is from Ben Perry. He asks: A recent report indicates that 40% net births are to unmarried women, up from 5% in 1970. How does the church balance traditional marriage with the changing cultural norms?

Ben is right. A number of studies, including a Yale University study released on March 16th of this year, report that in the United States, 40% of children are now born outside of marriage. This number includes many adopted children and children born through surrogacy, but those actually make up a very small number.

It is for many an alarming statistic. And it is not the only marriage norm that is changing. Same-sex marriage has dramatically changed the marriage landscape in the United States. Who can get married legally and in the church has been the fastest evolving social/moral/religious issue of the past decade. Also, according to an extensive study performed by Mona Chalabi of fiverthirtyeight.com, in 2015, 38% of women in traditional marriages earn more than their husbands. And, of course, the number of couples getting divorced every year, which has dropped some in recent years, is still roughly 40% of the number of people getting married.

One can look at these statistics and say that the marriages most of us grew up hearing about or seeing on television or being taught about in church are somehow under attack, and certainly many people are saying that. They look at Ephesians 5 and say that the traditional roles of husbands and wives have been rejected and therefore all of this change is unbiblical and immoral.

Just this week, after I had chosen Ben's question to end our Stump the Pastor Series, the Coalition for Biblical Sexuality, in conjunction with the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (and let's be honest, just those two group names should make us nervous) issued what they are calling the Nashville Statement — much to the chagrin of the City of Nashville, whose mayor condemned the statement less than 24 hours after it was issued.

With the world on the brink of heaven knows what is going to happen with North Korea; with half of East Texas under water; with people drowning by the hundreds in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, India and Nigeria; with global super power tensions at a 20-year high — these two organizations issued a 14-article statement condemning sex outside of marriage, same-sex relationships (especially marriages), bisexuality, transgender people, churches who support same-sex marriage or LGBTQ leadership in their churches, and even the concept of agreeing to disagree based on competing biblical interpretations.

For us LG and B folk, this is nothing new. It's just doubling down on positions certain folks in the evangelical world have taken against us for decades. But the renewal of their condemnation of all sex outside of traditional marriage AND their cruel dismissal of the reality of transgender ideation, asexuality and any other non-binary expression of gender

and/or sexuality is vastly beyond what they have said in the past. Their condemnation of churches like Northminster and denominations like the PC (USA), where we have said these are questions of conscience and interpretation that are not appropriate for mandatory positions one way or the other, also is new.

And while they don't specifically site it, it's clear that their understanding of marriage is based at least in part on Ephesians 5 and on passages in the Old Testament about marriage and divorce. Let me make it clear, flat out, that though they specifically claim otherwise, their interpretation of those passages necessarily requires believing in the superiority of husbands over wives and a patriarchal understanding of marriage that reflects first century and early views of women as either chattel to be contracted away by their fathers or utterly voiceless and powerless. In other words, they are captive to ideas that most of the church left on the ash heap of bad theology half a century ago.

Still, I suppose, we could answer Ben's question by saying that this is one way the church could balance tradition and change — by doubling down on tradition with something like the Nashville statement. But, knowing that I am not a disinterested observer and that I do not have all of the answers and must be humble anytime I confront a faith statement by other Christian sisters and brothers. I submit that to follow their path would not be faithful. Indeed, it inflicts untold and inexcusable harm in the name of the gospel. And I believe it tramples on the central messages of Jesus Christ and the gospel he proclaims: a message of love and grace and welcome.

That's not to say that I believe the church's response to cultural change should be benign acquiescence. Not at all. But I believe that the Bible itself instructs us to begin not from a place of moral lines drawn in the sand, but from a place of empathy. I think that's the central message of that bizarre passage from Romans that I read a little while ago. Paul is responding to people who have made different interpretations of Old Testament standards and he says that some believe this and some believe that, but are they seeking to be faithful? Are they submitting themselves to God in all they do? Then stop complaining that someone does something or believes something different from you because you are not the master of anyone else...you are not the moral judge of anyone else. All of us answer to God who is gracious. And, in Paul's words, all of us will be upheld by the love of God in Christ.

It's Paul's spin on the words of Jesus that Jessica read from the Gospel of John — when the expression of faith rises to the level of throwing stones, it's moved beyond anything holy to being about power and control and arrogance. Let the one without sin cast the first stone. And the only one who was worthy to cast a stone is instead writing in the dirt. In other words, he is teaching, not judging or condemning.

So what does the Bible say to us about changing norms? Does it give us any clues other than Paul's acknowledgement of diversity of belief being something God is okay with? What did Isaiah dream God was saying to him? "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert." A new thing. So maybe change can be of God? Not always necessarily, but a new thing — a new understanding — can be of God. Okay,

that's helpful but did you notice that odd passage about the animals? "The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches?" Bizarre, right? That's a rather odd duo to select as the beneficiaries of God's new thing — until you realize that in the food laws of the Hebrew Bible, jackals and ostriches are unclean. They are cast out, unnatural and not fit for human interaction. But Isaiah understands God to be saying that this new thing will also be for the benefit of those who have been rejected and condemned, those deemed unclean. In this new thing, even they will rejoice.

Do you see where I'm going with this? What if the mostly white, mostly male signers of the Nashville Statement have it exactly wrong — that clinging to their traditional views that exclude and make an "other" of beloved children of God is the stumbling block Paul condemns and is standing right in the pathway of the new thing God is doing to welcome those we previously viewed as unnatural and not fit for human interaction?

So if moral condemnation is not the answer to Ben's question, what is? What do these three passages have in common? They all appear to be calling us to greater empathy with the outcast, with those who believe differently than we do, with those that others would condemn.

How does empathy help us respond to Ben's specific question about the change in births by unwed mothers? Well, perhaps we start with trying to understand why it's happening instead of jumping immediately to a moral code of conduct. If we do that, we see that there is a direct correlation between the rise of poverty and incarceration rates in certain communities — mostly racial and ethnic minority communities — and the rise in births outside of marriage. If we look deeper we see if you are born into a single parent family, you are more likely to be a part of one in your adult life. So, is this social change not a result of our slipping morals but a symptom of system racism and a culture of incarceration of the poor, particularly of poor black men? I don't know the answer to that question, but I have my suspicions.

What if our call then is not to point fingers, but to drop our stones and start writing in the dirt, to teach and learn and listen and increase our understanding, particularly to learn if we are a part of systems and structures that are undermining families? To that end, we'll be having a series of conversations this fall after ToGather where high school youth and adults will grapple with what our faith, the Bible, and our experiences teach us about what human relationships of all kinds — including intimate relationships — should look like. I hope many of you will make the effort to be a part of those conversations.

But our learning and discerning begins with the calling of these passages, a calling to humility, to empathy and to understanding. And, if we are following Jesus's example from scripture, that will then lead us to action, making us agents of healing, not division; of reconciliation, not moral superiority. May God be with us on the journey and may we be Christ's agents of transforming grace. Amen