

Come let us reason together: On the decision of the United Methodist Church to exclude certain people from marriage and ordination
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On Tuesday, February 26, a special conference of the United Methodist Church voted to exclude same-sex people from access to church marriage and ordination. Besides the fact that this development may well impede the move toward full communion between the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church — thought to have been possible by 2021 — this decision is emblematic of a rift among Anglicans as well. Unlike the provinces of the Anglican Communion, whose synods vote for their own church, the Methodist conference includes lay and clergy delegates from around the world. Some 30% were from Africa and elsewhere. The 53 to 47 split vote shows their influence, because according to the Pew Foundation, a majority of American Methodists favor same-sex marriage.

The 2020 Lambeth Conference called by the Archbishop of Canterbury is controversial in that it has also excluded same-sex spouses from the meeting of bishops and spouses from around the world. Thus the recent Methodist decision underlines the general schism across the board between Christians of the global North and global South.

When some provinces of the Anglican Communion approved such marriages, they were accused of rejecting the authority of Scripture. Some other provinces of the Communion have therefore called for their bishops not to be invited to the next Lambeth Conference, just as their own bishops generally boycotted the last Conference in 2008.

There are all kinds of arguments advanced for or against extending marriage to same-sex couples: the plasticity of sexualities, procreation, “complementary” sexual consummation, the supposed indifference of the Church toward marriage until 1215 A.D., injustice toward same-sex couples, etc. For many Christians of the global South, proscribing same-sex marriage (and by extension, ordination) is a matter of fidelity to biblical teaching. None of these focuses on what makes marriage the Church’s business. That question rests on two pillars: the authoritative words of the Scriptures, and the natural law.

Many will claim that there is no such thing as natural law. Conversely, others still think the natural law can be understood without reference to its history, as if we all understand it, well, “naturally”. Contemporary philosophers continue to refer to Cicero. “True law is right reason corresponding to nature,” he famously wrote in *On the republic*. Cicero understood clearly that each society has its own approximation of the natural law, expressed by and embedded in historically conditioned mores, customs, myths and legends, rituals, and art. His influence continues today. For *true* law is *right* reason, and so defective reason will give rise to false law. That means that the interpretation of Scripture depends not only on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but also to an extent on changing cultural mores and societal norms, not to mention of course the enduring influence of human sin.

It is not the authority of the Bible that is at stake. It is how to understand Scripture so that you and I can live in the here and now according to the Good News: in Jesus God so loves the world, including you and me. The Ten Commandments tell us some things to avoid under the authority of divine love. No one disputes these. Only four verses of Scripture are at stake in this controversy. We disagree as to whether they refer at all to the same-sex couples who belong to our churches. Certainly, Jesus never referred to these folks. Nor do those four verses ever refer to people who love one another.

What is painfully clear from the record of Scripture itself, the history of Israel, and the history of the Church is that coercion to exclude some from the People of God has never led to more faithful witness to the living God, more loving people who change the world around them for the better, or for that matter, has ever led to deeper understandings of the Holy Scriptures. This is true for all Christians, including Methodists and Anglicans. Come let us reason *together*.