

For Christian Millennials, gay marriage debate produces new views on morality

by [Harry Bruinius](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Few were surprised when America's largest denomination of "mainline" Presbyterian Christians voted to redefine marriage Tuesday, officially changing its church constitution to extend the sacred union between "a man and a woman" to "two people, traditionally a man and a woman."

After all, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is one of the more socially liberal within the cacophonous swirl of American Protestantism, in which local congregations or regional governing bodies are often empowered to shape their own understandings of faith and Scripture.

Yet the redefinition also points to larger issues involving same-sex marriage that younger American Christians, in particular, are wrestling with. As gay and lesbian people have become a visible part of mainstream life in the past decade, many of those who have grown up with this new visibility have begun to question the previous generation's moral condemnations.

Across the denominational spectrum, millennials—including many among the more conservative evangelicals and Catholics—are pondering interpretations of scripture, and they're finding new meanings of morality and Christian love. These young people are also feeling a disconnect between their church life and U.S. society, where cultural understandings of human sexuality have been changing quickly and dramatically.

"When everywhere you go you have full equality—the military, on TV, in business . . . in schools, university classes, political institutions—and only in this one outpost of culture do you have people not accepting—it forces questions for our young people," said David Gushee, a professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University in Atlanta, who . "That disjunction between a culture that is moving toward full civil equality, and a church that isn't, is very visible to our young people, and they at least want to talk about that and know what to make of that."

As a group, evangelicals remain those most opposed to same-sex marriage in the United States, the Pew Research Center has found. But among white evangelical millennials, 43 percent now favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to legally wed, up from 20 percent in 2003, according to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute last year. And a full 85 percent of self-identified Catholics under the age of 30 say homosexuality should be accepted by society, a Pew survey from last year found.

Of course, many Christians are not embracing such ideas. After the vote by the mainline Presbyterians this week, another denomination, the conservative Presbyterian Church in America, affirmed the traditional view:

“We, like other evangelical, conservative, orthodox, and traditional Christians from many branches of the Christian faith, believe that, from creation, God ordained the marriage covenant to be a unique bond between one man and one woman,” read a statement by the church, which is the second largest U.S. denomination, with nearly 370,000 members. “This biblical understanding is what the Church has always believed, taught, and confessed. Therefore, we believe that the divinely sanctioned standard for sexual activity is fidelity within a marriage between one man and one woman or chastity outside of such a marriage.”

Others, however, are celebrating this week’s vote by the mainline Presbyterians, or the PCUSA, as the denomination is sometimes called.

“Our movement has witnessed extraordinary policy change for Ordination Equality and Marriage Equality in the span of five years,” wrote Alex Patchin McNeill, executive director of More Light Presbyterians, in a blog post Thursday.

MLP is an advocacy group in Minnetonka, Minnesota, that has worked to change the church’s definition of marriage.

“We know from our involvement with other social justice movements that policy changes are seismic shifts in communities that call us to live into the hope they produce,” wrote McNeill, himself in his 30s.

In general, American Protestantism has long been defined by its reliance on the Bible as its sole authority. And Gushee, who declared his support for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in churches in the book *Changing Our Mind* last year, still bases his ethical thinking on scripture. But, he said, Protestantism has long

changed its interpretations of the Bible as its experiences have begun to change.

Even evangelicals as a whole, he points out, changed their interpretation of Scripture to accommodate expanded roles for women—upending selected verses that had been understood to mean women should be silent or keep their heads covered. The experience of slavery and the Holocaust also transformed the Bible's ostensible teachings on race.

And today, new experiences, especially among the young, are transforming what Gushee sees as misinterpretations of what the Bible condemns in a handful of passages, written to address an ancient context.

"A big part of why that is the case is because more and more of us are coming to know gay and lesbian Christians, in their dignity and their suffering," he said. "Many millennials no longer find the older narratives of condemnation plausible: It doesn't fit the facts, and it doesn't fit the lives of people that we know."

McNeill, part of a younger generation of leaders in the PCUSA, invokes the traditional "Protestant principle" proclaimed in the church's Book of Order: "The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, that is, 'The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God' in the power of the Spirit."

As millennials increasingly take the reins of leadership in many U.S. congregations and denominations, many say, other churches will use this quintessentially Protestant principle to begin extending traditional, biblical Christian morality—including monogamy and fidelity—to gay and lesbian couples.

"I hope that this can be an opportunity for renewal, because I hope that that means that some people who have disengaged with various churches, because they've heard only this one issue, because they heard just a denial of various sexual orientations and ways of loving one another, will come back to the church," said Shannon Craigo-Snell, a professor of theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kentucky and an ordained PCUSA minister.

Indeed, mainline Protestant churches have lost members for decades. In many cases, however, it's because conservative churchgoers have been dismayed by their denomination's accommodations to the vicissitudes of culture. The PCUSA has had more than 37 percent of its members leave since 1992, while the PCA has seen a 6

percent increase in the past five years.

Thus the PCUSA's vote this week might, in fact, exacerbate the membership issue. "We have lost and will lose members, and even churches, over this decision," Craigo-Snell said.

But she also sees the opportunity.

"My hope . . . is that this will be a tipping point," she said. "I think there's a whole generation for whom the notion of marriage inequality just makes no sense."