



13th of April 2021

## «Marriage for all»!<sup>1</sup>

### A position paper by the IG Feministische Theolog\*innen<sup>2</sup>

**The *IG Feministische Theologinnen* welcomes the Swiss parliament's approval of «marriage for all» in December 2020.**

**For us, this approval marks the end of the elementary discussion of «marriage for all.» Now the foundation is laid for us to finally debate, in the first part of this paper, questions that interest us as feminist theologians and seem relevant. In the second part, we will elaborate on feminist-theological answers to objections against «marriage for all.»**

However, since recently a referendum against «marriage for all» has been established, we once again want to state why in our opinion, there are no biblical or theological reasons whatsoever against opening up marriage to same-sex couples.

In the biblical account, there exists not a singular form of marriage but many different ones. The focus of the Bible's creation story does not lie on marriage between men and women but the topic of us humans being created in the image of God. Because we are created in God's image, we, as a community of people different from one another, are called to be God's representatives in creation together.

Furthermore, it is, from our point of view, unacceptable when nowadays the Bible is used to condemn sex between men or between women (and, in consequence, homosexuality). Where this happens, not only are biblical passages torn out of their cultural and historical context. Such a condemnation also stands in contrast to Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor. We further discuss this topic in the second part of our paper.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a translation of [https://feministische-theologinnen.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/210418\\_Ehe-für-alle\\_Positionspapier.pdf](https://feministische-theologinnen.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/210418_Ehe-für-alle_Positionspapier.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> The «IG Feministische Theologinnen»: <https://feministische-theologinnen.ch/>.

## **Part 1: What we want to discuss**

In the following, we are going to name topics and questions that we would like to discuss. We want our elaborations to be understood as a foundation for discourse rather than closed answers.

### **1.1 How do we interpret «marriage» from a (feminist-)theological point of view?**

As we further explain in paragraph 2.4, marriage, both in the Bible and in the contemporary context, is essentially a legal institution. How can it be interpreted theologically? Do we even want to, from a feminist standpoint, interpret it theologically? We fear that a theological understanding of marriage could lead to its' moral idealization. Such an idealization is problematic for several reasons: The long history of violence in marriage, the husband's legal privilege at the expense of the wife, and the pressure in our society to regard marriage as the most favorable way of living.

### **1.2 For whom do we ask the blessings?**

In the Reformed-evangelical context, other than in the Roman-Catholic one, marriage does not have the status of a sacrament. The couple «merely» receives God's blessing for their joint path. What does it mean if we exclude same-sex couples from this blessing? In what way does this promote a two-class blessing? Wherein lies the theological difference between a blessing ritual, which is nowadays already granted to same-sex couples, and a marriage ritual, which at the moment is an exclusive right of married heterosexual couples?

Wherein lies the «advantage» of a marriage ritual, and is it theologically justified?

### **1.3 Should the possibility of a blessing (or a sacrament) be tied to a legal contract?**

In Switzerland's publicly and legally acknowledged churches, wedding ceremonies are only allowed for people who got their marriage sealed at a registry office. From a theological perspective, the question arises why we tie the gift of blessing or a sacrament to the legal recognition of marriage.

### **1.4 Which forms of reproductive medicine are ethically justifiable?**

As is visible below in chapter 2.5, we argue the position of no right to have children. Nevertheless, the government should provide the legal framework so that a desire for children can at least potentially be fulfilled. The discussion on which forms of reproductive medicine are ethically justifiable should be lead independently from the one on same-sex marriage. In Switzerland, in vitro fertilization and sperm donation are legal only for married (heterosexual) couples. We see no reason why these possibilities should not be opened up to homosexual (in fact: only lesbian) couples.

For male same-sex couples, the situation is a bit more complicated. Egg donation and surrogacy<sup>3</sup> are prohibited in Switzerland, not only for gay couples but also for heterosexual ones.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not these should be granted to all kinds of couples (also heterosexual ones) is a debate we, as a society, must lead in the future. We want to express the following concerns coming from a feminist perspective:

How is a woman's self-determination over her body secured? Who is held accountable if a surrogate mother gets health issues resulting from the pregnancy or deliverance? What happens to the child if the parents don't want it, for example, because it is disabled?

Well formulated laws could be more suitable for promoting decency regarding these questions rather than categorical prohibitions. With the current legal basis, Swiss couples seek surrogacy abroad.

### **1.5 Why do we ignore bisexuality in this debate?**

The current debate makes it seem as if people were either homo- or heterosexual. It is often expected of people to decide on one of these types of sexual orientations. People who identify as bi- or asexual are largely ignored in this discussion. Why?

### **1.6 Why is there such a low variety of different types of legally defined relationships?**

Already in biblical times, there were different forms of marriage. In our society, there are also diverse kinds of relationships and ways of living. Why shouldn't there also be more forms of legally regulated relationships?

### **1.7 Why are homosexual relationships so often equated with sexual practice? In heterosexual ones, on the other hand, sex is regarded as an integrated part of the romantic relationship.**

Same-sex romantic relationships are often reduced to sexual longing and practice instead of being recognized as affectionate relationships that include love, trust, responsibility, honesty, and sexuality. Why?

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<sup>3</sup> In German, the common term for surrogacy is «Leihmutterschaft» (which literally means «mother for rent»). However, in the German original of this text the alternative term «Ersatzmutterschaft» (literally meaning "substitute maternity") is offered which, the authors explain, is used by those who refuse to speak of «leihen» (=renting) when talking about people.

<sup>4</sup> Globally surrogacy is used more often by heterosexual couples than gay ones.

## Part 2: Objections against «marriage for all» and our responses from a feminist-theological perspective

In this part, we are going to respond, from a feminist-theological point of view, to common objections against «marriage for all.»

### 2.1 Preliminary remarks on the relation of the Bible and politics

«We take the Bible seriously but not always literally.»<sup>5</sup> Biblical texts influence our concepts, ideas, and visions for our life – in this regard, they have a political significance. However, we cannot use and will not abuse them for party politics because they do not come from our context and do not offer any direct answers to the questions of our times. We take encouragement from the biblical texts and the message of Jesus to fight against injustice.

### 2.2 «God created humans as men and women»

One of the prevalent arguments against «marriage for all» states that the Bible says that «God created humans as men and women.» That is why, in this line of argumentation, same-sex marriage is against the will of God.

Our response to this argument goes as follows: This sentence seems to convey a clear message. But the issue at hand is not as simple. At the beginning of the Bible, there are not one but two creation stories, each of which says different things about how and why humans came to be. However, the topic of marriage is not addressed in either one of these stories (see below, paragraph 2.4).

In the first creation story (Gen 1,1–2,4a), it says, God created humans in the image of God. With this, God chooses, from the beginning of their creation on, a certain destiny for human beings that sets them apart from all other creatures: They ought to represent God in creation as his/her images (Gen 1,26). The secret of what it means to be created in God's image lies, in our opinion, in the word «us» in the sentence: «Let us make humans in our image, similar to ourselves» (Gen 1,26). In the history of Christianity, this «us» has repeatedly been interpreted as a hidden reference to the Holy Trinity – not a lonely, isolated but a «social deity» (Kurt Marti). As God's representatives in creation, we are therefore called to live in relation to others. This can and may lead to offspring – which is also what the other animals are called to do (e.g., Gen 1,22). It is crucial for humans that they are called to represent God on earth as men and women – hence, in their diversity.

The fact that God created us as male and female beings does not necessarily mean that we have to live and reproduce in heterosexual marriages, but that we should work in partnership and each with our gifts in order to give God a human face in his or her creation.

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<sup>5</sup> This quote comes from <https://www.vineyard-basel.ch/ueber-uns-2/> - we gladly agree with it.

Heteronormativity is not God's will but a human construct. The latter we can see in the second creation story (Gen 2,4b–25): God does not want the human being (Adam) he/she molded to be alone. Therefore, God creates two sides from the human. One of them God creates as a woman (isha). The other side (Adam) is surprised how similar the woman is to itself,<sup>6</sup> and from then on calls itself Man (ish).<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the man is, in consequence, so amazed at the woman he exclaims: «That's why a man leaves his father and mother to follow his wife and they become one flesh» (Gen 2,24). This sentence is often regarded as the biblical foundation for marriage between man and woman. However, there are at least two reasons why this is not plausible: Firstly, it is not God him- or herself who expresses this sentence, but Adam. A partnership between man and woman cannot be led back to the intention of God but is much rather be understood, in the course of the story, in connection to Adam's enthusiasm for Eve. Secondly and fittingly, this sentence describes a practice that cannot be found in other biblical texts (there, it is usually the bride who moves into the house of the groom). That's why this sentence cannot be used generally as a biblical reason for the marriage between man and woman.

### **2.3 «God loves the sinner, not the sin. God loves homosexuals, but not homosexuality»**

Although this statement is used less against «marriage for all,» it is connected to it because it says something about homosexuality's alleged opposition to God. Our response is structured into two parts – first, we will make some general remarks on the relation of sexuality and society (1), and after that, follow more biblical-theological thoughts (2).

(1) Human sexuality is a vast and complex phenomenon that to this day hasn't been explored and cannot be explained completely. Sexual orientation, which includes the question of hetero- and homosexuality, is one topic in this broad field. In contrast to what may be associated with the term, it does not encompass sexual attraction but also related affections, feelings, self-images, and identities. Nowadays, it is known that sexual orientation is neither static nor exclusive but can change during a lifetime.<sup>8</sup> Reasons for the fluidity of sexual identity can, for example, be growing up (and the process of identity-formation, also in one's affective-sexual life, that is a part of it) or changing circumstances of life, for example, a new opportunity to be in a homosexual relationship. In light of this complex situation, it is important to us to emphasize that the relationships we commit to and the affections we have mustn't be reduced to mere biology. Culture, religion, and socialization are also essential factors in determining what is possible for an individual. Last but not least, what is possible and desirable in our individual love lives also depends on our decisions. Against this background, we find attempts to «pray away» or «heal» sexual orientation very problematic.

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<sup>6</sup> «This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.»

<sup>7</sup> In this story, the statement «She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man» comes from the side calling itself Man. It expresses the patriarchal idea that the masculine side of the human understands itself as the more primal or original version of it - although, according to the second creation story, it is «merely» one side of the original earth being.

<sup>8</sup> Recently, Carel van Schaik and Kai Michel have proven that fluidity of sexual orientation is a function of evolutionary survival, see Van Schaik/Michel: *Die Wahrheit über Eva*, 147ff.

Luckily, such forms of therapy are looked at more critically in public nowadays.<sup>9</sup> Many personal testimonies – voices that are heard more often today – have contributed to this shift of public perception.<sup>10</sup> Even more so do we welcome all institutional and private attempts to help other people to accept themselves the way they are – whatever their sexual orientation, body size, gender, or skin color may be – and to support them developing strategies of defense against oppressive forces in our society.

(2) In the biblical texts, there are no examples of homosexuality or committed homosexual relationships. The Bible does not speak about romantic gay relationships as we know them today. Therefore, it cannot be used to condemn them. Anyways, there are a few verses that tackle homosexual practice, all of which are disapproving. However, theologically it would be a jump to conclusions to declare these passages to still be valid today without regarding their context:

- a. There are two passages in the Old Testament (Lev 18,22; Lev 20,13) found in the so-called Holiness Legislation (Lev 17–26). It encompasses laws and prohibitions that should help the people of Israel uphold their holiness, which was granted to them by divine election. Hence, many passages deal with questions of purity and the maintenance of order inside of the community. These regulations of purity and demarcation have no more validity for Christian men and women because Jesus broke them with his words and deeds (especially by eating at a table with prostitutes, customs officers, and soldiers) so that all – without exception – may take part in the promise God originally gave to Israel. This means: Even though according to the biblical texts, Jesus never said anything about Lev 18,22 and 20,13, it is safe to assume these regulations have been made obsolete by his ethics. They made sense in a specific cultural and religious context, but, from a modern Christian standpoint, not any more so. This is the reason why we get angry when Lev 18,22 and 20,13 are presented as prohibitions by «divine eternal law.» Still, no word is said about other prohibitions that are also a part of the Holiness Legislation: Near Lev 18,22, it says, sex with menstruating women and adultery with a married woman is to be punished by the death penalty as well.<sup>11</sup> But nobody talks about these regulations today anymore.

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<sup>9</sup> In Germany, these kinds of «healing therapies» are forbidden since 2020. In Switzerland, there was a similar motion in 2019 but it is still due: <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaeft?AffairId=20193840> [1.23.20201].

<sup>10</sup> Gay reformed theologian Renato Pfeffer has spoken about his experience in various contexts: <https://www.ref.ch/news/ich-habe-unter-der-konversionstherapie-sehr-gelitten/> [1.23.20201]. This talk with reformed theologian Priscilla Schwendimann, who lives together with her girlfriend in a registered partnership, is also very moving: <https://www.reflab.ch/leben-und-glauben-ein-steiler-weg-zu-mir-selbst/> [1.23.20201].

<sup>11</sup> From a feminist perspective, it is interesting how, in this text, it is not seen as adultery if a married man has an affair with an unmarried woman. Hence, adultery was sort of understood as a male claim to another man's possession (his wife) and was punishable for that reason.

- b. In the New Testament, the only passage dealing with gay sex is Rom. 1,26ff.<sup>12</sup> Here, Paul does not only condemn sex between men but also between women. The fact that this is the only biblical passage mentioning lesbian sex tells us how to interpret it: Lesbian sexuality and lesbian relationships were taboo in the patriarchal societies of the ancient Mediterranean space. While Paul uses lesbian sex as an example here, he points out a phenomenon that must have seemed quite strange to him. As a peculiar phenomenon, lesbian sex offers the perfect example to illustrate all of creation's estrangement from God! Thus, reading Rom. 1,18–32 from its context, it's not so much about a Christian condemnation of gay sex but more so about delivering a time- and context-bound metaphor for human's estrangement from God.<sup>13</sup> If we reformulated this passage today, we'd rather speak of «toxic masculinity» as the epitome of sin. And in this spirit, we believe: Yes, God loves the homosexual and the bisexual, period.

**Conclusion:** Whether or not God hates (or loves) homosexuals, we cannot prove it. Nor can we prove God loves (or hates) heterosexuals. From our point of view, it is far more important how we live homo- and heterosexuality. Where they promote love, kindness, forgiveness, reconciliation, joy, faith, hope, and trust, we believe homo- and heterosexuality is lived according to God's intention.

## **2.4 «According to the Bible, marriage is meant between a man and a woman.»**

This argument is often brought up against «marriage for all.» However, from our point of view, no unambiguous definition of «marriage» can be deduced biblically. In the Bible, marriage only exists in plural: Abraham married his half-sister Sarah; Jacob married the two sisters Rachel and Leah; David married Abigail, Michal, Bathsheba and had even more wives; Ruth entered into a marriage-in-law with Boas, etc. In all of these examples, marriage served not as a religious but a legal institution. The essential purpose of it was to guarantee the economic security of the spouse\* and – in a patriarchal society – the children's descent from the husband (the mother was considered safe). Although love marriages did exist, they weren't the norm – in contrast to what we expect and hope for nowadays in society and in church!

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 6,9 and 1 Tim. 1,10 do speak on sex between men, however, the partners involved are unequal in social power - so-called pederasty.

<sup>13</sup> This image of Paul - homosexuality as an expression for the estrangement from God - is still used in conservative churches (mainly in the US) to this day. In some of these churches, people who are not heterosexual are asked to either be quiet or chose celibacy, which leads to their isolation and social exclusion (Jesus and Paul were also celibate but they were expecting the end of time soon - so that was a bit of a different timescale). In others, people who feel differently are encouraged to be honest about their attraction and find ways, with help of their community, to serve God in the «brokenness of their sexuality», without acting on their same-sex attraction. Organizations, tutorials, etc. have been built and developed for the purpose of helping these communities and people. It is this particular second group that profoundly alienates us with the time, money, and effort they come up with for a topic that has never even bothered Jesus. Don't we as Christians\* have more pressing issues than to control who likes to lie with who in one bed?

Furthermore, marriage wasn't the only imaginable way of life: Jesus and Paul were both celibate!

Against this background, we cannot regard biblical texts as standard to deduce «the Christian understanding of marriage as a covenant between man and woman» from them. The most important commandment for living together, handed down to us from the Jesus movement, is to love one's neighbor (Lk 10,27 par; Rom 13,9).<sup>14</sup> Hence it is decisive for us, from a Christian perspective, in what spirit (in the true sense of the word!) a marriage is entered and led: The spirit of love, trust, compassion, loyalty, etc. A spouse's\* gender, on the other hand, their origin, the amount of money they have on their bank account, is not crucial to the spirit of Christ: «There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus» (Gal 3,28).

## **2.5 «There is no right to have children; children are always a gift from God.»**

We agree entirely with this. However, we are convinced, God doesn't only operate through miracles but also our hands, our words, and our thoughts. Thus, we as a society can help and contribute to at least the legal possibility of realizing one's desire to have children – as have Boas und Ruth entered marriage-in-law to help Naomi become the mother of an adopted child. That's why we welcome the possibility for same-sex couples to adopt children and start a family. Growing up, children don't necessarily need both a mother and a father. Much more so, they need trustworthy and loving people to relate to, no matter what gender.<sup>15</sup> It's also worth noting that parents (regardless of their gender) seldomly raise their children all by themselves: Godfathers, godmothers, teachers, coaches, etc., can be (male or female – human) role models for youth and children encouraging and shaping them in their growth. Equally, we welcome lesbian couples getting access to sperm donation and thus are granted the same rights as heterosexual couples. In fact, some lesbian couples fulfill their desire to have children nowadays already by accessing sperm donation abroad. But we explicitly wish for the possibility of sperm donation to be opened up to lesbian couples in Switzerland also – hereby granting the so conceived offspring a «right to ancestry.»<sup>16</sup>

## **2.6 «Gay people should not have children because they could get bullied.»**

We think it is wrong to argue that gay couples shouldn't have children because of their potential danger of becoming victims of bullying. It is far more important to develop an awareness about who is discriminated against, bullied in, and excluded from our society

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<sup>14</sup> March the 7th 2015, in an edition of the Swiss radio - and television channel's program «Sunday Sermon», the evangelical-reformed pastor Sibylle Forrer also refers to this commandment as the most important one. See <https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/wort-zum-sonntag/vi-deo/ehe-fuer-alle?urn=urn:srf:video:8ba413c0-064b-4a40-9a75-724db82fef80> [1.23.2021].

<sup>15</sup> Continuing comments and ideas are offered in Stephanie Gerlach's book: Regenbogenfamilien. Ein Handbuch, Quer Verlag, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> In Switzerland, adopted children and those who were conceived by sperm donation have a right to get information about their parents (ancestry) as soon as they come of age.



(which happens among children already) and for what reasons to tackle these issues afterward.

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## Continuing Literature

This part includes a list of literature we find worth reading.

Ten theses on «marriage for all» by Prof. Dr. Jörg Frey – a specialist on the New Testament:  
<https://sola-gratia.ch/10-thesen-zur-ehe-fuer-alle-sek-joerg-frey/> [1.23.2021].

Statements in favor of «marriage for all» by the Catholic Women's Circle:

- [https://www.frauenbund.ch/files/Files/Downloads/Stellungnahmen/2019\\_06\\_Haltung\\_VV\\_Ehe\\_fuer\\_alle.pdf](https://www.frauenbund.ch/files/Files/Downloads/Stellungnahmen/2019_06_Haltung_VV_Ehe_fuer_alle.pdf) [1.23.2021].
- [https://www.frauenbund.ch/files/Files/Downloads/Stellungnahmen/Einwaende\\_Ehe\\_fuer\\_alle\\_2019\\_01.pdf](https://www.frauenbund.ch/files/Files/Downloads/Stellungnahmen/Einwaende_Ehe_fuer_alle_2019_01.pdf) [1.23.2021].
- [https://www.frauenbund.ch/files/Files/Downloads/Stellungnahmen/2019\\_Stellungnahme\\_Ehe\\_fuer\\_alle\\_SKF\\_kor\\_fuer\\_Website.pdf](https://www.frauenbund.ch/files/Files/Downloads/Stellungnahmen/2019_Stellungnahme_Ehe_fuer_alle_SKF_kor_fuer_Website.pdf) [1.23.2021].

«The Bible on marriage» from the perspective of social ethics by Dr. Christoph Ammann:  
<https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/kantonale-initiative-schutz-der-ehe-was-die-bibel-zur-ehe-sagt-ld.127204> [23.1.2021].

Books:

- Deryn Guest u.a. (Hg.), The Queer Bible Commentary, SCM Press, 2006.
- Valeria Hinck: Streitfall Liebe. Biblische Plädoyers wider die Ausgrenzung homosexueller Menschen, pro literatur Verlag, 2007.
- Carsten «Storch» Schmelzer: Homosexualität. Auf dem Weg in eine neue christliche Ethik? Brendow Verlag, 2015.
- Kerstin Söderblom: Queer theologische Notizen, esuberanza, 2020.