

## ***The Wired Word***

Student Handout

# **Pope Calls for Civil Unions for Same-Sex Couples**

**Sunday, November 1, 2020 --- from 9:00-9:45am**

*Hybrid Class*

*In Person:* First Floor Social Hall (Mask & Social Distancing Required)

*or*  
**Zoom: Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152**

Dear Class Member,

Last week, we learned that Pope Francis called for civil unions for same-sex couples, a move that is a clear break with the past in Catholic Church teachings. The pope's remarks give us an opportunity to consider the matter of power that churches, church leaders and even individual Christians hold to include or exclude others. So for our next class, we will consider what it means to mediate the power of God.

During this time of social distancing to control the spread of the virus, *The Wired Word* is including in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version.

### **How To Participate:**

We are offering *The Wired Word* as a hybrid class. You can participate in person or via Zoom. *The Wired Word* will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. For those meeting in person, we will be in the old social hall of the church building (located on the first floor). If participating in person, please come with a mask and follow the COVID-19 Safety Guidelines for Sunday School: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/news.html#COVID19Precautions>.

You can also participate in the *Wired Word* virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

*or*

by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592 US (Germantown, PA)

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220

Passcode: 195152

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## **Pope's Call for Civil Unions for Same-Sex Couples Garners Varied Reactions**

*The Wired Word* for the Week of November 1, 2020

### **In the News**

In a significant departure from official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, in a just-released documentary, called for civil union laws for same-sex couples.

"Homosexual people have a right to be in a family," the pontiff said, in *Francesco*, a documentary film directed by Russian filmmaker Evgeny Afineevsky, that premiered at the Rome Film Festival on October 21.

"They're children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out or be made miserable over it," the pope said in the film.

"What we have to create is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered," Pope Francis said.

While same-sex couples in the United States have the legal right to have their unions recognized as marriages, the same is not true in some places where the Catholic Church is established. In fact, in some countries where the Catholic Church operates, homosexuality is illegal.

While the pope's comments do not change Catholic doctrine, and they do not call for such unions to be considered marriages, they do represent a seismic shift in the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. Past popes have called same-sex unions inadmissible and deviant.

Francis personally has long been interested in outreach to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender; some people within those groups also add "Q" for queer or questioning) Catholics, extending back to his days as an archbishop, but as pope, his previous remarks have stressed understanding and welcome rather than specific policies.

American Jesuit priest and editor-at-large of the Jesuit magazine *America*, Father James Martin, calls the pope's new comments "momentous" for three reasons:

"First, he is saying them as pope, not as archbishop of Buenos Aires," Martin wrote in a Facebook post.

"Second, Francis is very clearly supporting, not simply tolerating civil unions," Martin said.

"Third, he is saying it on camera, in a new documentary, not privately," Martin said, adding that he'd seen the documentary, "and the filmmaker wisely shows him saying this on camera, not as voiceover."

While many Catholics welcomed the pope's remarks, others consider them little more than a step in the right direction. Still other Catholics view them as going in the wrong direction.

Thomas Tobin, the bishop of Providence, Rhode Island, said, "The Pope's statement clearly contradicts what has been the long-standing teaching of the Church about same-sex unions. The Church cannot support the acceptance of objectively immoral relationships. Individuals with same-sex attraction are beloved children of God and must have their personal human rights and civil rights recognized and protected by law. However, the legalization of their civil unions, which seek to simulate holy matrimony, is not admissible."

The reaction has also been mixed among LGBT people. Carol Smith, not otherwise identified, posted on Facebook, "As one half of a married same-sex couple I can see this two ways ... on one hand, this subject should not need the pope's approval or anyone else's for that matter! On the other hand, as a person who was raised Catholic I know how huge this approval is and hopefully it will stop any talk of a reversal on religious grounds."

Another Facebook poster, Paula Russell, wrote, "my lgbtq+ friends in LA and West Hollywood think [the pope is] taking them a step back. It may be a step in the right direction, but imagine if he said 'People of color deserve equal water fountains, just keep them separate from the white water fountains and restrict the rules around their usage.'"

Smith added that she suspects most married same-sex couples are throwing up their hands, saying, "Really? Do we really need to keep revisiting this?"

Writing about the pope's remarks in *This Week*, historian and author Neil J. Young, pointed out that "the overall effect of Francis' words may be more harmful than helpful, doing more to embolden those who seek to rescind established LGBTQ rights than they do to empower those fighting for basic civil protections for LGBTQ folks, including marriage."

Presbyterian elder and TWW team member Bill Tammeus, who is a former columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter* as well as a current columnist for *The Presbyterian Outlook*, takes a different tack, maintaining that all marriages in the United States, whether same-sex or between a man and a woman, should be civil marriages to provide equal protection under the law. "Once married, if a couple then wants a faith community to bless the marriage, they can go ask for that. And a faith community is free to say yes or no. That way not only are all treated equally in civil law, but faith communities maintain freedom to choose," Tammeus says.

"As it is now," Tammeus says, "clergy serve as both representatives of their faith and as agents of the state. I think we need to separate those roles."

At this point, it is unclear what, if any, lasting impact Pope Francis' remarks about civil unions will have. But they may enable some Catholics who've felt excluded to feel more welcomed by their church.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Pope Francis Calls for Civil Union Laws for Same-Sex Couples. \*The Washington Post\*](#)

[Pope Francis Calls for Civil Union Law for Same-Sex Couples, in Shift From Vatican Stance. \*Catholic News Agency\*](#)

[Pope Francis Supports Law for Same-Sex Civil Unions in New Documentary: 'They are children of God.' \*Fox News\*](#)

[The Double-Edged Sword of Pope Francis' Same-Sex Union Comments. \*The Week\*](#)

[What the Pope's Civil Union Statement Means. \*Bill's Faith Matters Blog\* \(scroll down to the article\)](#)

## **Applying the News Story**

The topic of this discussion is church power (with the "church" being whatever form of it one thinks of as affecting oneself -- a denomination, a local congregation, all Christians worldwide, a prominent religious leader, religious rules as imposed by parents, etc.). Many people, even those who don't attend church and maybe especially those who used to attend but no longer do, nonetheless view the church as sitting in judgment of them -- even when that may not actually be the case. Many pastors have had people they've reached out to say things like, "Oh, you wouldn't want me in your church. I don't live the way God wants me to." Some would gladly come, if only they felt accepted.

This is perhaps especially true among people who feel that the matter that keeps them away from church is something they cannot change, like their sexual orientation.

Now consider the impact of Pope Francis' remarks. Whether you believe his pronouncement went too far, not far enough or was about right, it was a warming of the Roman Catholic Church's attitude toward LGBT people.

As we said, the topic of this lesson is church power, and the Christian use of it. Our intent is not to debate the matter of same-sex relationships, which are a reality regardless of how one feels about them. Nor is the intent to challenge same-sex unions being considered marriages, as this is legal in the United States.

## **The Big Questions**

1. Were Pope Francis' comments in the documentary a responsible use of the power of a Christian church body? Why or why not?
2. When has a church's position on a matter touching your life made you feel unwelcome? When has a church's position on a matter touching your life made you feel welcome?
3. Is the church stronger when it is defined by what it stands against or by what it stands for? Why? Is there a time for each? How do we know?
4. On a going forward basis, should all marriages be civil marriages, with a church blessing of the marriage being an additional option worked out between the couple and a church (the idea explained by Bill Tammeus in the "In the News" section above). Why or why not?
5. Can something be good for society without being good from a Christian perspective? Can something be bad for society without being bad from a Christian perspective? Explain.

## **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **Jeremiah 1:9-10**

*Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." (For context, read 1:4-10.)*

Here, Jeremiah tells of God's call to him to be a prophet. Note especially the remarkable power God gave him regarding what he would say. God told him, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

That's a tremendous amount of power simply from a person's speech, but Jeremiah was called to be God's spokesperson, and those who heard him didn't think they were just hearing Jeremiah's personal opinion. Rather, many understood that the prophet was speaking for God, and thus Jeremiah's words impacted how they felt about their lives.

**Questions:** How is one commissioned to be such a person? By divine encounter? By selection by people of faith? Some other way (specify)?

What are some things you as a follower of Jesus seek to pluck up and pull down? What are some things you as a follower of Jesus try to build and plant?

### **Matthew 16:19**

*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* (For context, read 16:13-19.)

Jesus made the statement above to Peter after Peter, in response to Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?" (verse 15), replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

To hold the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" is to have an enormous amount of power, and it carries with it the fact that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." WOW! Isn't that one of God's prerogatives? And Jesus is passing it on to Peter.

Roman Catholic teaching holds that in this conversation, Jesus was making Peter the first pope, and if that's the case, then Francis' words last week can be thought of as having keys-to-the-kingdom-of-heaven authority. So if he was "loosing" the Catholic Church's view of same-sex unions, that was indeed momentous.

Protestants, however, are more likely to hear Jesus' words as a discipleship authorization. It's as if Jesus said to his followers -- including us today -- "Be careful. You will collectively yield enormous power in the world as my followers. If you decide something is allowable, and you let it go, it will be let go. If you decide something is sinful and you condemn it, it will carry a condemnable weight. Be careful what you tell people. You may forgive something God doesn't, and you may retain something God forgives. But for the people you are forgiving or not forgiving, you may be their only access to God."

Some Christians take a middle position: that the pronouncements of a pastor and of a local congregation have power *insofar as* they reflect God's pronouncements in scripture. In this view, a church or pastor's power is not arbitrary, but only transmissive: Its validity depends upon how accurately it transmits the gospel of salvation. Yet, when it does so, it *is* as powerful as if spoken directly by God.

Here's an example. In the 1950s, after World War II, there was a marriage and baby boom in the United States. But with an increase in marriage also came an increase in the divorce rate. Many Christian leaders sought diligently to find ways to keep couples together. In some traditions, divorce was seen as such a significant personal failure that divorced persons were disqualified from serving in leadership positions. While the intention was probably not to say that divorce was an unforgivable failure, for many divorced persons, that became the takeaway message. Many divorced persons, because of the influence of their faith tradition, became convinced that they had no welcome in the life of faith. In their church's view, their sins were retained, and so for them, that became a reality.

**Questions:** When have you been aware of someone attempting to speak for God about your life? How did that make you feel? How did you respond? When have you been aware of mediating the power of God regarding someone else?

### **Matthew 23:13**

*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. (For context, read 23:1-15.)*

### **Matthew 11:28-30**

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (For context, read 11:25-30.)*

For the common Jew in Jesus' day, scribes and Pharisees were the primary source of information about what God expected of them. Jesus acknowledged as much in verse 2, when he said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat" (with Moses being the intermediary for God's law).

For that reason, the scribes and Pharisees held a lot of religious power over the Jewish populace. These religious leaders taught a strict and legalistic interpretation of the 613 commandments stated in God's laws given through Moses. These interpretations created a body of requirements much larger than the original laws themselves. It was such a formidable mass of regulations that only a full-time legal specialist could hope to know -- and fulfill -- them all.

The result was that the common people often unknowingly violated one of these interpretations. For the most sincere and devout in their attempts to be faithful to the laws, a guilty conscience must have been a common experience. Some people may have been exhausted in their efforts to satisfy the demands of an overly legalistic religious interpretation.

Thus, Jesus here pulled no punches in accusing some Pharisees of misusing the power of religion to such a degree -- making it such a burden with so many detailed rules to follow -- that they were effectively locking people out of the kingdom of heaven.

In contrast, in another conversation, Jesus said to his fellow Jews, "Take my yoke upon you, ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." To paraphrase Jesus, he was saying, "Come to me, all you whose consciences bleed because you cannot achieve everything you believe is expected of you. And I will give you healing and inward peace."

Note that Jesus did not offer a life with no yoke at all. Freedom is preserved within protective boundaries, and a *healthy* conscience is one such boundary.

The yoke of Jesus' day was a wooden collar made for two animals so that they could pull together as a team. The yoke of Jesus is not one he imposes on us, but one he wears with us. His words might be rephrased as "Become my yoke-mate, and learn how to pull the load by working beside me and watching how I do it. The heavy labor of life will seem lighter when you allow me to help you with it."

**Questions:** When has the church unnecessarily added to your load? In what ways do you find Jesus' "yoke" hard to carry? In what ways do you find it light? In what ways do you feel that Jesus is helping you "pull" your load? Who besides Jesus do you rely on to help bear this burden or yoke?

### **John 12:32**

*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (For context, read 12:27-36.)*

Jesus made this statement to the listening crowd around him during his final week. And as the gospel writer explains in the context, the "lifted up" reference was an indication of "the kind of death he was to die" (v. 33). But notice the rest of the verse: His death would "draw all people" to himself.

**Questions:** Do you think Pope Francis' statement about civil union for same-sex couples was a means of "clearing the way" for people who feel drawn to Christ but who don't feel welcomed by the church? What, if anything, do you think Jesus is here calling you to do as his disciple?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Resolutions on social issues adopted by national church governing bodies sometimes get criticized by people in individual churches, especially when they deal with matters of a political nature. Can a denomination ever speak for all the members of its congregations? Should it try?
2. In the lifetimes of some of us, so-called mixed-race marriages were illegal. Today many Christians would be embarrassed to admit they might have previously considered so-called racial differences to be barriers to marriage. By what process were the keys to the kingdom used in your life and in your church to change those former barriers to marriage?
3. What role does -- and should -- fear play when a church uses its power to speak about controversial issues? Is a church ever right to suggest that disagreement with church policy or doctrine places the critic in eternal jeopardy?
4. The remarks of Pope Francis have tremendous weight because of the polity of his denomination, in which one person represents the apex of church power. His remarks outside that denomination have a good deal of weight because of the size of his denomination and because of the servant image he projects. If you belong to a different communion from Pope Francis, is there one individual or group who is empowered to make statements of equal weight and influence? Is it the result of the position they hold or the life they have lived?

### **Responding to the News**

This is a good time to consider what voice you feel you have in setting church policy and positions on such issues as same-sex marriage, and what voice you should have. If you don't have the power to influence policy and positions, is there anything you can do about it?

### **Prayer**

Help us, O Lord, to know the joy of welcome and of welcoming. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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