



SAME-SEX MARRIAGE?

A discussion about marriage and
public policy by Ryan Anderson



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Marriage Equality

Maybe you have heard the phrase “marriage equality.” It is often used as a slogan for same-sex marriage. But, ultimately, it’s a sloppy slogan. Everyone is in favor of marriage equality: We all want the law to treat all marriages equally. What we disagree about is what sort of consenting adult relationship *is* a marriage. And we need to think critically about this issue.

What does the Church teach?

The Catholic Church supports marriage, sees it as an incredible gift from God and teaches that it stems from the unique relationship between man and woman. “The intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws. . . God himself is the author of marriage.’ The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator” (CCC 1603). From this, the Church has come to understand that marriage is the lifelong, exclusive union of a man and a woman. On this account, same-sex marriage is an impossibility.

However, other than the witness of Scripture and the authority of the Church, is there a compelling reason to support marriage between

one man and one woman? For many, saying “because the Bible or the Church says so” is not compelling. And even for those of us who accept those authorities, what can we know about marriage from reason — and how can our reason better inform our faith? This article focuses on the philosophy and social science that undergirds good public policy on marriage. It’s meant to be accessible to the general public and doesn’t require any particular faith commitments.

In this context, we should also note the Church teaches that all people deserve to be treated with respect and that those struggling with same-sex attraction are in no way excluded from the possibility of holiness.

“The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition. Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.” (CCC 2358 – 2359).

Why does the government care about marriage?

To begin, we need to ask the question, “Why is the government concerned about marriage?” For we are, in fact, talking about whether the law should allow for same-sex marriage. Is the government just a sucker for romance? Of course not. If this issue were just about consenting adult love, we could get the state out of the bedroom.

The reason the state cares about marriage is because the union of a man and a woman can produce a child, and children deserve both a mother and a father. Marriage exists to bring together a man and a woman as husband and wife so that children have access to the love, care and attention of their mother and father. Marriage is based on the anthropological truth that men and women are distinct and complementary, including the biological fact that reproduction requires both a man and a woman and the social reality that children deserve both a mother and a father.

Whenever a child is born, a mother is always close by. That's a fact of biology. The question for culture, and therefore the question for law, is this: "Will there be a father close by and, if so, for how long?" Marriage is the institution that societies across the globe and throughout human history have devised to maximize the likelihood that a man commits to a woman and that the two of them will then commit to any children they may have.

It should be noted that the state can do this without in any way criminalizing or burdening anyone's freedom. Under the law, adults have the freedom to live in other arrangements if they choose; it just doesn't recognize those arrangements as marriages. (As a reminder, this is a discussion of law. For the Church's teaching on other arrangements, see CCC 2331 – 2400.)

Why does marriage matter?

One thing we know from social science is that there is no such thing as parenting in the abstract. There is mothering and fathering. Men and women bring different gifts to parenting. Sociologist David Popenoe conducted a literature review on what social science tells us about parenting. As he stated:

“The burden of social science evidence supports the idea that gender differentiated parenting is important for human development...and the contribution of fathers to child rearing is unique and irreplaceable...We should disavow the notion that mommies can make good daddies just as we should disavow the popular notion that daddies could make good mommies. The two sexes are different to the core and each is necessary culturally and biologically for the optimal development of a human being.”

Here’s a thought experiment to reveal this point. If a five-year-old boy is in the living room and a parent is teaching the child how to wrestle without being violent — teaching him that it is okay to put people in headlocks, but it isn’t okay to bite, pull hair or gouge eyes — which parent is most likely in the living room? If you answered the father, on average and for the most part, you are going to be correct. This is not because we are engaged in some sort of gender stereotyping in which only fathers can do this; it’s just that this behavior is what comes naturally to fathers. In the same way, fathers tend to throw newborn babies up in the air while mothers tend to say, “Honey, not so high.”

Additionally, we know that when a father/son relationship fails to materialize, there tends to be negative outcomes. Boys without fathers are more likely to commit crime, less likely to graduate high school and less likely to be employed. The father is doing something important when he is wrestling with the five-year old, when he is tossing the football with the ten-year old and when he is helping the fifteen-year old get ready for the first dance.

Fathers do something similar for their daughters. Fathers tend to be the ones that police the daughter’s relationships or scare away the bad boyfriend. Additionally, a father who is married to his daughter’s

mother also models what a good relationship looks like. He models the sort of man she might be looking for in a potential husband. And, therefore, girls without fathers often suffer the consequences. In general, girls without fathers tend to start sexual activity earlier and are more likely to have a non-marital pregnancy.

Children without a father in their life have done nothing wrong — but, on average and for the most part, they will face a tougher road in life. This does not mean that every child who faces these circumstances will suffer these problems, but the risks are greatly increased. From the perspective of civil law, this is why marriage matters.

The Consequences of Redefining Marriage

You may agree with much of the above, but perhaps you're still wondering, how does redefining marriage to include same-sex couples hurt anyone? Are the above social realities truly a reason to deny same-sex couples the ability to marry under the law? We can answer these questions by addressing some of the further consequences of the redefinition of marriage.

Fathers

If marriage is a genderless institution, there is no institution left in public life that upholds, even as an ideal, a child's right to have both a mother and a father. Redefining marriage sends the signal that men and women are interchangeable and, therefore, mothers and fathers are replaceable. It ultimately makes marriage more about adult romance than about the needs or rights of children.

Additionally, changes in law produce changes in culture. The law has a capacity to teach. We can see this, as one example, with the introduction of no-fault divorce law. Prior to the introduction of no-fault divorce law, when you filed for a divorce in the common law tradition, you would cite one of the three A's: abuse, abandonment or

adultery. (It is important to note here that we are talking about civil law, not the Church's teaching. For insight on the Church's teaching about divorce, see CCC 2382 – 2386.) These are three serious reasons for taking a relationship that had an expectation of being permanent and declaring it over.

With the introduction of no-fault divorce, the law now taught that you could get out of marriage for frivolous reasons, any reason or no reason at all. And what has happened because of this law? Divorce rates have more than doubled. Additionally, what have we seen during these last fifty years? There has been a de-centering of marriage. Some of this occurred because of changes in the culture, but it also happened because of changes in the law. The law sent the signal that marriage didn't even need to aspire to permanence, and citizens responded. Law shapes culture; culture shapes beliefs; beliefs shape action.

This change has had radical consequences for our culture. Fifty years ago, births to single moms were in the single digits. Today, forty percent of all Americans are born to single mothers, with even larger percentages among African Americans and Hispanics. The consequences for those children and those communities are drastic. Everything discussed in the above section with respect to crime, education, employment and poverty is impacted by this change in marital law.

The biggest social crisis we are facing in the United States right now is the plight of absentee fathers. Here is where this connects to our discussion on marriage. How can we insist that fathers are essential if we redefine marriage to make fathers optional? If marriage is not between one man and one woman, but rather just two people who love each other, we have created a definition of marriage in which

fathers do not matter. Why would we seek to remove fathers (or mothers for that matter) from the definition of marriage, when so much harm has been caused by absentee fathers already?

Logical Consequences

There are further logical consequences that flow from the elimination of gender from the definition of marriage. The terms used below may seem unlikely options for marriage, but they follow logically. Additionally, these terms have been used by activists to describe the living arrangements of real people.

Throuple

Not long ago, a New York magazine ran a profile of a throuple: a three-person couple. Three men in New York City lived together, loved each other, slept with each other, cooked meals for each other and went to visit each other in the hospital. They wanted to own property together and have joint checking accounts. They claimed that their love life was the same as anyone else's, except there were three of them.

Now, if marriage is redefined to include same-sex relationships, on what principle can you deny marriage to the same-sex throuple, or to an opposite-sex quartet? Because the way that we arrived at monogamy in law is because one man and one woman can unite as one flesh in the very same act that can create new life. So it's one man and one woman, one husband and one wife, one mom and one dad. But once the male/female aspect of marriage is considered irrational, arbitrary or even bigoted, what's magical about the number two?

Monogamish

This term, used in the *New York Times*, describes a two-person relationship in which the couple is not sexually exclusive to one another. It is an open relationship. It's monogamish. If marriage is primarily about consenting adult love, what need is there for that relationship to be exclusive?

Wedlease

Found in the *Washington Times*, this is a play on the word “wedlock.” Whereas wedlock denoted something strong, sturdy and permanent, wedlease means something temporary. In a wedlease, you might have a five- or ten-year marriage license, which could be renewed but would otherwise simply dissolve after the given period. If the right of a child to have a mother and a father who love and care for them is not the primary concern of marriage, what need is there for permanence? Now, whatever you think of these terms, if these were included in the legal definitions of marriage, what would be the consequences? It is likely that a definition of marriage that embraced these terms would dramatically increase the odds that children would be raised in homes where the adults are not committed to each other and potentially not to the child. These relationships would directly undercut the public policy purpose for marriage: that the child has the love and care of a mother and a father. And yet, all these terms follow as a logical consequence, just as night follows on day, once you remove the male/female aspect of marriage.

Conclusion

This article began by asking the question, “What is marriage?” in opposition to the phrase “marriage equality.” Hopefully it’s clear this is the critical question in this debate. Marriage is an extremely important institution. We can’t be swayed by empty slogans. We have to do the hard work and ask ourselves what marriage really is, why marriage matters and what consequences there are if we allow marriage to be re-defined.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. What stood out to you the most in this article?**
- 2. Do you know anyone who struggles with same-sex attraction, and what would it mean to treat that person with love and respect?**
- 3. The article discusses the public policy reason for marriage: to support the right of a child to a mother and a father. What is your perspective on the reasons for marriage?**
- 4. The article mentioned two serious consequences for redefining marriage: making fathers optional and three different types of “marriages” that logically follow from a redefinition of marriage (throuple, monogamish and wedlease). How serious are these consequences? What do these consequences show us about the definition of marriage?**
- 5. What aspects of this issue are you still struggling with and how do you still need to grow in your understanding of this topic?**

Additional Resources:

For a deeper discussion on this issue, try reading the following books:

What is marriage: Man and Woman: A Defense by Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George.

Getting the Marriage Conversation Right by William B. May.

Truth Overruled: The Future of Marriage and Religious Freedom by Ryan T. Anderson

Also, consider watching Fr. Philip Bochanski at formed.org on the pastoral treatment of those with same-sex attraction.

You may also watch a video presentation of this resource at <https://focusoncampus.org/content/the-hardest-questions>, which includes some additional information about how to share this topic with others.

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