

Marriage – can it be same sex? And does it matter?

Come November this year we will be asked whether or not we want to change the definition of marriage to allow same sex couples to 'marry'.

Many are saying that this change is an important step to take, and that it is a small thing, only affecting a few people.

I want to consider this briefly, but not this time from a biblical perspective. [A talk series](#) and a [previous paper](#) address it from that perspective.

Instead I want to discuss this through the lens of three other perspectives – history, definition and impact. And show that this question is far bigger than many suggest.

1. History

This change will be a very great departure from the way human society has functioned throughout all recorded history. Although homosexuality was known in other societies and even celebrated in some, no other culture before us has endorsed same sex marriage. History is totally united in its testimony that marriage is between a man and woman. And governments and religions didn't create it. It is a natural union, formed from the natural bonds that are essential to life.

This isn't to argue that the way history has been, is the way the future must remain. Things can change. And some change can be for the better. But I don't think it is too much to say that this is the first time we are proposing to change something so much part of the core fabric of every society, in every time, in every culture, from the beginning.

It is a big call to believe we are wiser and more insightful than every culture before us.

2. Definition

We are not just being asked to change a few words in the Marriage Act. The proposed change requires us as a society to endorse a far deeper change in the way our whole society thinks about marriage. And this change will impact every marriage.

Let me explain.

At present we have swirling around our community *two views* of what marriage is.

There is the modern, popular sense of what it is. Call it the 'romantic endorsement' view of marriage. It is the belief that marriage is nothing more than society's endorsement of the romantic feelings one person has for another. Two people fall in love. They want to share their lives together as people who have these feelings of love for each other. And so, they ask society to endorse these feelings and mark that they have them, by legally recognising them in the traditional service of marriage.

This view of marriage is so popular very few modern people have ever thought there was another way to think about marriage.

And the popularity of this view, is one of the reasons we are even having this debate. The logic is clear. If marriage is simply society's endorsement of two people's romantic love and a same sex couple have these feelings of romantic love, who are we to refuse them the symbol of society's endorsement of their love? It seems unfair to allow only heterosexual couples this endorsement. Hence the slogan – 'equal love'.

It is why we think it is *necessary* to have SSM. If marriage is about romantic love, then it needs to be available between two people who feel that attraction, whatever their sex.

Within this modern definition of marriage, this thinking makes perfect sense.

But...

The fact is, there is another view of marriage, the historical view, the classic view. It's not the 'first thought' definition for many, although it sits beneath the surface for most of us. And so it needs a fuller explanation.

This view has been labelled the 'comprehensive union' view

On this definition, marriage is the mark we give to two people who commit to join together in a deep union of life, for life. And this deep union is a union of not just heart and affection but also the union of **purpose, will and body** in such a way that the union 'speaks to' the possibility that a new family might be established.

The fact is, only one kind of couple can unite in this way; a heterosexual couple. This is obvious when their biology is considered. Every human is a biological whole, needing no other person to biologically function, except in one area, the area of reproduction. To complete that function a person needs a person of the opposite sex to contribute. The bodies of the man and the woman 'speak' to this fact. Their genitalia are clearly designed to join together in a sexual act that 'speaks' to the fact that they need each other to complete their biology and form new life.

This truth is reflected in the fact that we talk of 'consummating' a marriage. A marriage is only finally 'consummated' and so made real and full, when a couple unite bodily in a particular sex act - intercourse. It is this act that 'speaks' to their 'comprehensive union' and so the validity of marriage. They are now one - a biological whole, so to speak. This fact is reflected in common law.

And when that sex act completes itself, it produces a child that further unites the couple. The child that is born to them is theirs. They don't need a legal process to recognise or pronounce on this. It is simply so, by nature. What is formed through a comprehensive union marriage, is a natural family which is the full union of heart, mind, body and child.

Note that this definition hasn't used the language of romance or attraction.

A 'comprehensive union' can properly form with or without romantic attraction or feeling. This isn't what it *is*. At root it is a commitment to lovingly give myself to another in heart, mind, purpose and body, whether or not I feel romantically attracted to the other person.

This provides the context for a deeper kind of a love, the kind that God models in his love for his world. He so loves the world that he gave his only son for us, to save us, even though we aren't lovely, or loveable. True love doesn't *need* romantic attraction. It forms in the context of a heart's desire to lovingly be 'for' another person. This is deeper than romantic feelings (though romantic love may often be experienced). And it is more substantial. And open to anyone. Sexual orientation is no impediment to a man marrying a woman.

Up until recently this has been the sense of what marriage is.

If this is what marriage is, then it is obvious that a same sex attracted person isn't excluded from marriage. But it is also obvious that a same sex couple can't be married. This isn't bigotry or inequality. It is definitional, based on biological facts.

This therefore means, that the only way a same sex couple can be 'married' is to change, not only the wording of the act but also the very meaning of the concept of marriage. It cannot any longer be viewed as a 'comprehensive union'. Rather, we must adopt, universally, the 'romantic endorsement' view of marriage. And further, we will need to remove any vestiges of the 'comprehensive union' view. This ought to be obvious. If the 'comprehensive union' view survives among us it will constantly undermine the validity of same sex marriage. It will keep saying same sex marriage isn't a real marriage.

At this point I'm not arguing for or against either definition. I am simply pointing out that the decision we make in a few week's time is far larger than we are being told and that there is a great deal more at stake.

Many people believe that this major shift in definition is harmless. They tell us it will only do good.

Is this true?

Consider the impact - more broadly and then as it applies particularly to marriage and family.

3. The Impact

Note firstly that we need to consider the implications of this decision. Some are saying this step isn't appropriate or necessary. They say that we are only talking about the issue of same sex marriage; nothing more. And they are even saying that to talk of other issues is a clever side step or a 'red herring'.

But this is like a multinational wanting to build a coal mine near the Great Barrier Reef and then refusing to discuss possible flow on effects in the environment and insisting that any evidence of environmental impact is a 'red herring'. Crazy.

Human community is an ecosystem. Like the delicate balance we now appreciate in nature, society has a balance to it. Change one piece and it flows on to impact other pieces. We can't change such a fundamental piece of human society and give no thought to the implications more broadly.

Up until recently the consideration of implications has been largely theoretical. But given that a few countries in the west have now taken this radical step, it is possible to see the impact in lived reality. I still think it is far too early to see the full range of impact but enough is obvious to give great cause for concern.

The impact on society as a whole

Paul Kelly, a senior Editor at The Australian newspaper, himself a secularist, has written recently that the list of changes present in communities that have embraced same sex marriage is "a long and startling list." He notes that it has meant in some countries the closure of religious adoption agencies, gender fluidity becoming normalised, believers in traditional marriage being forced out of various professions and litigation (a quick internet search shows more). After listing a number of these impacts, he concludes by saying that "the evidence and examples rebuff the lazy response from politicians that this is not a serious issue".

Now, many same sex marriage advocates may welcome these larger societal changes.

But the point here is that these changes have flowed on immediately after legalising SSM. It hasn't been just a change of a few words, which impacts only a few people.

In fact, as lesbian journalist, Masha Gessen, on ABC radio recently said "fighting for gay marriage generally involves lying about what we are going to do with marriage when we get there – because we lie that the institution of marriage is not going to change, and that is a lie. The institution of marriage is going to change and it should change."

Or as 'yes' campaigner and columnist for the Age Aubrey Perry says, "it's about much more [than legalising SSM]. It's our opportunity to say that religion has no part in the shaping of our laws... and ultimately, in the foundation of our social structure." For her, this is about ridding our country of the influence of Christianity. Many others have noted that this is about presenting a new vision of the way we ought to think about men and women.

Some have even made clear that this isn't even ultimately about marriage. It is about society's validation of a lifestyle. It is a kind of therapy. As Brendan O'Neil says in an excellent essay, "it's about seeking 'the sanction of the state' for [gay's] intimate relationships," and so there can't be any exception for the conscience of some people or groups. (See link below).

Again, some people will welcome all of this. But the thing to note is that voting for change, is voting for much more than a small change to a sentence. There will be a significant change to the whole shape of our society. And many of these changes will be unintended. We are tinkering with a delicate ecosystem. One apparently small change has huge, long range consequences everywhere in nature – and this will also be so in human society.

The impact - on marriage and family particularly

What about the change for marriages, in particular?

First, it will further weaken marriage.

If we adopt this new definition of marriage, we will be required to establish in law the view that marriage is nothing more than society's endorsement of two people's romantic affection. And we will need to stamp out the older 'comprehensive union' view (see above).

Is this a problem?

Absolutely.

This new view of marriage is far weaker than the older version. It produces weaker marriages. The fact is, feelings of romantic affection are thoroughly inadequate to sustain a couple through the ups and downs of life. And when they wane, as they necessarily will, then it almost becomes a matter of integrity for a couple to quit their marriage. If marriage is *about* romantic feelings of love, and a couple no longer 'love' each other then it would be 'living a lie' to continue married. That is, it would be denying the very essence of what marriage is to remain in a marriage if they no longer feel romantic affection for their spouse.

This is merely voicing the totally consistent application of a life lived under this modern version of marriage. We already see this among us. That is, marriages have already been weakened as we've adopted this view. But if we establish this new view in law, we will increase this weakening effect. But more, we will remove any tempering effect that the classic view brought us.

'So what'?

Our children.

Children do best in the context of a life-long faithful union. Wherever children experience divorce or separation or removal from a biological parent, they experience deep loss. There is the possibility of some recovery, but the scars remain.

Our children need strong marriages. And the fact is, our modern view of marriage doesn't provide the rationale for that. If marriage is nothing more than endorsing my feelings of love, then we can't expect anyone to remain in marriage when those feelings fade. Perhaps it might be said we could help people see that it matters that they stick it out – for the children. That they embrace marriage as being about life-long commitment, whatever the feelings. But this is to change the rules! It is to shift a marriage from personal satisfaction and fulfilment, grounded in feelings, to what's best for other people, including the children, no matter what my feelings. And that would be to return to the older view of marriage – the comprehensive union view. The older view *created an expectation* that marriage was about being 'other person centred' for life. When properly instructed in the truth of what marriage was, you only entered into it if you were committing to be 'for' the other person and any children that might come through your union, for life – for better or worse, for their good and the good order of society.

The modern view has none of this. And by definition, it can't have it. Because if it does, it then undermines the case for the *need* for same sex marriage, and its validity.

If same sex marriage wins, we will, by definition, have instituted a weakened view of marriage. And in fact, the more successful the same sex marriage case is, in arguing for the complete change in the way we think about marriage, the more powerful the weakening impact will be – across all our marriages.

We can't have both – same sex marriage *and* the stronger comprehensive union view of marriage.

This isn't a case of simply making room for a small group of people to share in marriage. It is a case of destroying one view to make room for a weak and impoverished view.

And what we will destroy is a union that has brought great good throughout centuries of recorded human history, across all cultures and religions.

Secondly, the link between fatherhood and children will be severed.

Again, this isn't immediately obvious. But with some simple thinking, it is vividly clear.

We can only consider same sex marriage because we have also changed the way we think about parenting. A great deal of effort has gone into convincing our world that there is no vital link between a child and its biological parents. This has been necessary because if there *is* a vital link then clearly a same sex relationship will never be able to be the same as a heterosexual one.

This should be obvious.

For a same sex couple to form a family, a child must always be removed from at least one of its biological parents. If this does disadvantage a child, then it can never be 'like' a heterosexual marriage. It can never be truly equal. It will always be other than a heterosexual union. But because the same sex lobby group wants their relationships to be regarded as equal to a heterosexual union, they must prove that they can form families that are equally ideal. And so, there is a great effort to prove there is no vital link between biological parents and children.

If this effort is successful and it seems more and more people are buying into it, then we will end up convinced that a child *doesn't* need its biological parents.

The consequence? It moves in a surprising direction. We will lose more fathers to parenting.

A mother has a number of significant advantages over a father when it comes to the bonds that help her be secured to her biological child. She carries the child for nine months. She has to be present at the birth. And she is physically equipped to engage in the deeply personal activity of suckling her child. A father has none of these physical bonds. He is involved at the conception stage and then has no necessary physical bond from that point on.

This doesn't suggest for a moment that he can't or won't be bound emotionally to his biological child. It is simply to note that he doesn't have the same necessary physical bonding agents. A father needs to choose to bond rather than be bound by a raft of physical experiences. This is why so many fathers find it far easier than mothers to walk away. And it is why a young man can father a child and not feel any sense of ownership or responsibility. But the young mother cannot avoid having those feelings. She is bound to her child in deep physical ways.

The big point.

The way we have always helped men choose to bond with their children is by teaching them the vital link that exists between father and child. They fathered this child. They therefore have an obligation. The child needs their biological father. The child's mother needs its father. If we rid our thinking of this conviction, we will remove a key cultural driver that helps connects fathers to their children and the children's mother. We will lose more fathers to parenting.

Does this matter?

Exactly! We need to know.

Is it true that a child doesn't care about the identity of his or her biological father? Is it true that a mother doesn't need her children's father partnering her in parenting? (see link below).

If SSM proponents end up being able to persuade most people that the answer to these questions is 'yes', it will be a pyrrhic victory (one that destroys everything as it wins). They will win people to accept SSM, but will lose fathers to parenting because they've persuaded us that children don't need their biological parents, and so more dads will opt out.

This isn't a 'red herring' as some proponents of SSM insist. It is at the heart of the debate.

Conclusion

Although a difficult debate, there is a silver lining. It may well help us rethink and correct the inadequate notions on marriage we've inherited through popular media. It is a powerful thing to reflect again on what our marriages are, and recalibrate. They aren't merely about endorsing our feelings of romantic affection. They are about creating a loving comprehensive union that is only possible for two people of the opposite sex to experience – for their well-being but also for 'the good order of society'. Marriage is a big deal.

And of course, if SSM comes in, marriages and families won't fall apart the next day. And many will navigate the new world we create. But they will do this because they reach back to the older view of marriage and sustain their union by denying our modern notions – either consciously or unconsciously. But over the long haul, if many proponents of SSM are as successful as they hope in crushing this older notion of marriage, we will foster more and greater problems for more and more people.

We can say all we like that this debate is only about whether or not two people can have their romantic affection endorsed by society. But the fact is this is about much more. It is about the very shape of marriage – for all of us. It is about the link between father (and a mother) and a child.

To embrace SSM will actually change a great deal. It will enshrine a new view of marriage for all of us. And it will change the way we think about parenting. And the ones in our community who will bear this cost are our children and their children.

This is a massive issue. And it is a matter of love for others to speak up about these things.

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For further reading

Additional material on marriage, gender & sexuality
<http://evchurch.info/marriage-gender-sexuality>

On Impact
<http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2012/11/6758/>

Brendan O'Neil - <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/the-trouble-with-gay-marriage/17016#.WaJH061L2Ho>

The impact on children –
<http://thembeforeus.com/think-legalizing-gay-marriage-will-help-kids-lgbt-parents-think/>

Research on impact on children -
<https://critiqueama.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/medical-critique-of-the-ama-position-statement-on-marriage-equality.pdf>