

Should Civil Marriage Matter to Christians?

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With the radical redefinition of marriage today - where the complementarity of male and female has become merely a matter of preference - most people in the Christian and Jewish communities are concerned about the future of marriage. Some are questioning whether people of faith should participate in civil marriage at all, either in getting married by the state or as clergy officiating such weddings. It is an important question.

civil marriage (*noun*) a marriage performed, solemnized, recorded, and recognized by a government official as a civil contract.

But the belief that faith communities can have their own marriages and drop any interest in civil marriage fails to understand the nature and necessity of what marriage itself is and does. Frankly, no citizen in any culture can conclude that civil marriage does not matter to them and therefore decide not to be concerned with participating in and advocating for its original form as a lifelong commitment between a husband and wife. Here are three key reasons why:

I. **Marriage is not a Christian institution**

- Marriage is much older than 2,000 years old.
- It exists beyond the cultures influenced by Christianity or Judaism.
- Marriage predates religion and law.

II. **Marriage is a common grace given to all humans, in all cultures everywhere.**

- Marriage is given to all people at all times as a common grace from God.
- No community anywhere at any time can subsist without it.
- Anthropologists cannot find any culture – ancient or modern, primitive or developed – that doesn't administer some form of marriage that binds man and woman together.
- Edward Westermarck, the anthropologist who has written the most thorough history and cultural explanation of marriage, tells us:

Marriage is generally used as a term for a social institution We... As for the origin of the institution of marriage, I consider it probable that it has developed out of primeval habit.

He explains its universal nature and social purpose:

That the functions of the husband and father in the family are not merely of the sexual and procreative kind, but involve the duty of protecting the wife and

children, is testified by an array of facts relating to peoples in all quarters of the world and in all stages of civilization.¹



- While marriage differs in various forms across cultures - number of spouses, division of labor and living arrangements, etc. – it has always centered on the union of husband and wife, father and mother and their common children.

And it does for very important reasons.

III. The essential social tasks of marriage

- *Marriage is more than a private institution between the couple and their immediate families. It is an essential and irreplaceable public institution.*
- It alone provides the social genesis of and foundation for the other essential social institutions of worship, production and trade, education, law enforcement and health care.
- In fact, in 323 BC, Aristotle noted that each of these and more originate exclusively from and can only sustain themselves through the strength of the family unit.²
- This is why the term “nuclear” is used to refer to the essential husband-wife-children triad by Aristotle and secular anthropologists.
- Thus, every culture must (and does) develop (civil) laws and customs to govern the creation, encouragement and protection of these unions.

A) Thus, marriage is the only durable, efficient and effective way to accomplish four essential communal tasks.

1. **Regulates sexuality:** Discouraging promiscuity and sexual aggression by establishing who does and does not have sexual access to whom.
2. **Gives mother and father to children:** Establishes the child’s dual kinship ensuring each child will be cared for and raised by his/her mother and father and their extended families.
3. **Gives husband and wife access to shared resources:** Gives both wife and husband rights over and access to the fruit of each other’s material resources and domestic and market labors.
4. **Joins extended families:** One’s parents, siblings and children become in-laws to others.

B) As such, marriage accomplishes the following indispensable tasks better and more effectively than any other social institution, including the government:

¹ Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*, Vol. I, (New York: The Allerton Book Company, 1922), p. 26, 27, 46.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, trans, Peter L. Phillips Simpson, (The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Book 1, chapter 2, p. 9-11.

1. Ensures every child grows up with the benefit of the cooperative care, protection and education provided first by a mother and father who have the greatest interest in and dedication toward seeing the child thrive and succeed.
2. Assigns and enforces responsible fatherhood which all children need and from which mothers benefit richly.
3. Essentially removes the risk of poverty for women and their children.
4. Checks and reduces sexual promiscuity and unmarried child-bearing.
5. Significantly reduces criminal and violent behaviors of both adults and children.
6. Encourages and enforces the consistent and productive market work of men and women.
7. Secures the care, setting and resources needed for the physical and mental health of its members.
8. Provides for the best care of aging citizens.

Thus, civil marriage cannot be ignored by any sector of a community nor redefined to reflect the spirit of the age. Standing faithfully and uncompromisingly as custodians of natural, civil marriage is a love-of-neighbor issue.

What to Do?

So what should Christians do today when civil marriage has been radically redefined as a wholly private and transitory arrangement via no-fault divorce and a genderless union through same-sex “marriage”? We must:

1. Realize enduring civil marriage is an essential social good and cannot be redefined according to our contemporary wishes nor abandoned by the church.
2. Stand as active witnesses for the necessity of marriage as a lifelong and sex-distinct institution.
3. Commit to living out the faithfulness, authentic beauty and significance of marriage in our own lives and communities.
4. Continue to perform male/female civil marriages *exclusively* as a witness to these facts until prohibited from doing so by the state, which will then require our civil disobedience.

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