



“For this reason a man will leave father and mother”

I’ve been thinking a lot about marriage recently. Our daughter Rebecca is to be married to Kevin Wood on August 12th. And my parents celebrate their fiftieth anniversary in October.

Marriage has also been on my mind because of recent legal developments. When my parents got married back in 1950, nobody was questioning what marriage was. Not everyone got married. And some radical voices such as Bertrand Russell disputed whether *anyone* should get married. But at least people knew what marriage meant. The law and the church were agreed—it’s an exclusive, sexually intimate relationship of one man and one woman entered into voluntarily and intended to be lifelong.

Where has the consensus gone?

On April 26th, Governor Howard Dean signed Vermont’s “Civil Unions Bill” into law. While it doesn’t explicitly change the state’s definition of marriage, it gives same-sex couples access to the same legal benefits as married couples. And the same obligations. For example, a gay couple that has certified their union will have to go through a form of “divorce” if their relationship dissolves. So is there any *real* difference between marriage and a civil union?, people are asking.

The same question is being asked on the Canadian side of the Vermont border. A lesbian couple, known to the court simply as M. and H., split up many years ago, and M.

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was left penniless. So she sued H. for a division of the couple's assets. H's response was "No deal, we weren't married. Community property laws don't apply." M. came back, "But community property laws *should* apply; we were as-good-as-married." In the end, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed, and forced a legislative change. As of this spring, Canada has a category of "common law partner" along side that of "married," with virtually the same legal rights and obligations falling to persons in either category.

Focus on the Family Canada has seen this as the end of marriage, and said so in full-page newspaper ads. Leading gay-rights activists have responded that they don't see how a law that recognizes their relationships undermines anybody else's marriage. Who is right?

Doesn't the answer to that turn on what we mean by marriage, in the first place? I find it significant that the cases that have gone to court in the USA and Canada have argued that gays and lesbians are being denied their "civil rights" if they are prevented from getting married. Civil rights are rights created by law, and refer to ways in which governments are obligated to treat their citizens. M., for instance, argued that she was being treated unfairly by the government because they wouldn't allow her to sue her former partner.

Following this line of argument treats marriage as a *legal* institution, defined or redefined as the state thinks right. Is that the way Christians ought to think of it? Does the government create marriage, or does government recognize an institution that God has created?

And what is the *point* of marriage? What *good* does it serve? In the current debate, some of the Christian groups I am associated with have argued that bearing and raising of children is the primary purpose of marriage. To say the least, that sounds outmoded. But it

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sounds better than what the court said: “the exclusion of same-sex partners from the benefits of [legal marriage] ... implies that they are judged to be incapable of forming intimate relationships of economic interdependence as compared to opposite-sex couples.”

Such words regard marriage as a business. If that is true, then “Who wants to marry a multi-millionaire?” was not a mockery of marriage, but its glory! Maybe Professor John Witte of Emory University was right to title his history of marriage in the West, *From Sacrament to Contract*. Maybe marriage for most people today is nothing more than an economic partnership.

Happily, that’s not been the case for me. Even after 27 years of marriage, I don’t pretend to know all that God means marriage to be. But I’m certain God didn’t mean it to be merely an economic and/or procreative partnership legislated into existence by the government. Genesis says it’s that for which a man will leave his father and mother in order to become “one” with his wife. The Apostle Paul (not always an advocate of marriage) says it’s an image of the relationship between Christ and the church.

I want my daughter and her fiancé to be married according to law, and I know that she and Kevin will be economically interdependent (that’s happening already!), and perhaps one day they will have children. But unless this is all undergirded and surrounded by the kind of sensitive, committed, warm, other-affirming love for which Jesus Christ gave himself, then what is it worth?

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