

EULOGY FOR TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE

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The classical, or traditional, view of marriage is not dumb or mean. It *can* be, but it doesn't *have to* be. And nor is it particularly religious, even though it coincides with what the major Faiths teach.

The clearest arguments for preferring the classical notion of marriage have not received much airtime. This is perhaps because those arguments seem merely academic compared to the heartfelt appeals of YES-campaigners and the serious concerns of the NO-campaigners. And I sincerely hope my attempt to rehearse some more abstract reasonings don't disregard the very real hopes and fears of our community.

If the polls are right, a change to Australian marriage law is only a matter of time. I, for one, won't be grumpy about that. The benefits of living in a liberal democracy far outweigh any angst people may have over losing an argument like this. I also hope and pray that if same-sex marriage is legalized it will make a positive impact on the mental health outcomes of the LGBTI community.

My purpose in outlining the classical case for marriage isn't to bolster the NO-campaign. It is to clarify why being unpersuaded about same-sex marriage is not necessarily thoughtless or heartless. What follows, then, is a kind of 'eulogy' for traditional marriage, a tribute to a venerable idea that seems to have failed to commend itself to a majority of Australians.

1. EQUALITY IN MARRIAGE

Many who disagree with the concept of same-sex marriage still feel the force of the key argument in its favour. If marriage is *a bond of love between two adults*, it makes perfect sense to extend the legal definition of marriage to include couples of the same sex. After all, same-sex love is just as real as the love between people of the opposite sex. Given this fact, and assuming marriage is just a bond of adult love, same-sex marriage follows as a matter of logic, and of justice.

But while everyone can (and should) accept that same-sex love is as important as heterosexual love, many do not believe that marriage should be thought of simply as *a bond of love between adults*. Many see marriage as *definitionally* connected to the one kind of human bond that can (at least in principle) create children. In other words, it is *the union of a man and a woman*. This emphasis on 'procreation' can, of course, be questioned: What about the elderly or infertile couple? I will try answer this below. But the key point remains: If we think of marriage as linked in some way to procreation, same-sex marriage just doesn't follow, either as logic or justice. Rejecting same-sex marriage involves no judgement about the quality of same-sex love, let alone homophobia. It simply acknowledges that same-sex couples are a different kind of human bond, one that doesn't have *the defining characteristic* of marriage.

Every definition of marriage excludes bonds of love that don't fit the definition. For example, the proposed redefinition of marriage will still exclude polyamorous unions

(not to be confused with polygamy). The loving bond of a bisexual man and his male and female lovers will be *excluded* from any definition that insists marriage can only be between *two* people. But this ‘exclusion’ does not involve a negative judgement about bisexuality or the quality of polyamorous love. It simply follows from the *two-person* definition of marriage. In exactly the same way, excluding same-sex couples from marriage isn’t a judgement about the quality of same-sex love. It is a logical consequence of the *opposite-sex* definition of marriage.

The question is: What is the best definition of marriage—is it *a bond of love between adults* (of either sex) or *the union of a man and a woman*?

2. THE UNIVERSALITY OF MARRIAGE

All cultures we know anything significant about have affirmed the same core idea of marriage, as *the union of a man and a woman*. Evidence of any other concept of marriage is entirely lacking from the historical record, despite unsourced claims to the contrary. Even in polygamous cultures, where an elite male takes several wives, the classical definition of marriage is still operating: the man is thought to have *several separate* marriages, each involving a union between just one man and just one woman.

The customs and laws surrounding marriage have, of course, differed over time and throughout cultures. But the central idea of marriage is universal.

The ancient Roman view of marriage offers a helpful illustration. The Romans were famously open to same-sex relationships—perhaps more than we are today—but they did not entertain the idea of the ‘marriage’ of people of the same sex. This was not because of ‘homophobia’! It was simply because they saw marriage as a unique class of human bond that could (in principle) create and raise shared offspring. Consider the words from a treatise on marriage by the first-century philosopher Musonius Rufus, known as the ‘Socrates of Rome’, a *pagan* not a Christian:

“The husband and wife should come together for the purpose of making a life in common and of procreating children, and furthermore of regarding all things in common between them, and nothing peculiar or private to one or the other, not even their own bodies. In marriage there must be, above all, perfect companionship and mutual love of husband and wife, both in health and in sickness and under all conditions, since it was with desire for this as well as for having children that both entered upon marriage.”
(Musonius Rufus, Fragments, 13A).

The quotation puts the lie to the common claim that ancient marriage was all about property, inheritance, and the power of men! There is no denying that patriarchy and hierarchy coloured ancient marriage—along with everything else—but the *ideal* for the Romans, as for other cultures, was the loving mutuality of a man and a woman as the proper context for raising shared offspring. That’s what marriage was about.

These notions probably sound religious, almost biblical. Similar ideas are indeed introduced in the book of Genesis (Gen 1:27-28; 2:21-24) and reaffirmed by Jesus

himself (Matthew 19:4-6). But this is simply because *all* cultures shared the same perspective. What's more, the Bible itself makes clear that marriage is not a religious practice, only for the faithful, but a common Good given by the Creator for the benefit of all cultures.

What is the significance of noting this unanimous opinion of history? Certainly not to offer an 'argument from tradition', the assertion that things should 'remain the same' because 'they've always been that way'. The point is more substantial. When humans throughout history have agreed about a central feature of life, it should at least give us pause to ask: *Why?* What did the rest of humanity see that we have missed? As G.K. Chesterton famously quipped, "Never move a fence until you know why it was put there."

It is not difficult to discover why diverse cultures put the same 'fence' in place. There is, at least, *some* logic and good intention behind the tradition.

3. THE LOGIC OF MARRIAGE

It is perhaps the most basic truth of our existence that everyone comes into the world through the union of one man and one woman. All societies observed this fact and highlighted the male-female bond as a *bedrock reality* by giving it the unique title 'marriage'. This is why marriage has exactly the *three* defining features it does: (1) two people, (2) of the opposite sex, (3) who intend to stay together. All three features are logically interconnected as the *only way* to hope that new human beings will be raised by the people directly responsible for their existence. If that's worth hoping for, classical marriage makes sense.

Traditional societies did not wait for children to be born to a couple before they declared them 'married'. Nor were they unaware that some marriages did not produce offspring. Yet, it was equally obvious that this is the *only kind of human bond* that can, and usually does, create children. Couples that were infertile or elderly were still considered 'married', because the term wasn't a description of the *outcome* of the union but a marker of *the kind of union* it was. There is only one class of human bond that can, even in principle, create and raise shared offspring. All male-female unions were known as 'marriage' for the simple reason that all such unions—whether or not they produced children—pointed to the incomparable Good that is *inherent* to the male-female bond, in a way that isn't the case (by definition) for same-sex bonds. The common claim that we cannot link marriage to procreation because some marriages can't have children misunderstands the classical view.

4. THE GOOD IN MARRIAGE

But why should any of this matter? Even if it is admitted that there is a certain logic to the traditional understanding of marriage, why fight to preserve that understanding when it exacerbates feelings of exclusion among LGBTI Australians?

The answer turns on how important we think it is that new members of the human family are raised by the two people responsible for their existence—for their DNA, physiology, personality, and genealogical history. If we decide that this is not

especially important, there will be little motivation to preserve the classical use of the term 'marriage'. If, on the other hand, we think that—*all things being equal*—having kids raised by their mother and father is an incomparable moral and social Good (for children, parents, and society), it makes sense to reserve the title 'marriage' for the only kind of union that is *inherently capable* of this Good, *intrinsically oriented* toward it, and *usually achieves* it.

A unique bond serving a unique Good warrants a unique title. Redefining marriage to mean just 'a bond of adult love' removes the very thing that made marriage a *bedrock* institution in the first place (the *in-principle* capacity to create and raise shared children), and so diminishes the place given to marriage in our society. Just as the well-intentioned school policy that "every child gets an award" can, over time, water down the very notion of an award, so including any loving adult relationship as 'marriage' diminishes the notion of marriage itself. This is not because same-sex love is inferior to heterosexual love. It is because same-sex couples do not serve the same (in-principle) goal as couples of the opposite sex.

None of this questions same-sex couples adopting children. Adoption almost always benefits children, and so is almost always a good thing. But single parents can also adopt, as can *de facto* couples. This doesn't make the adults involved 'married'. As I have said, marriage doesn't refer to the *outcome* of having children in a household. It is the marker of a *unique class* of relationship that embodies a unique hope—that a child would know and be known by the two people who brought her into the world, and love and be loved by those very same people. If that hope really matters, so does classical marriage.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in writing this 'eulogy' to traditional marriage is simply to highlight that disagreeing with the concept of same-sex marriage is not necessarily thoughtless and heartless. It arises from an abiding conviction that societies are enhanced by giving *more* (not less) emphasis to the most basic unit of human community: the one kind of human bond inherently oriented toward raising shared offspring. We can, and should, affirm same-sex couples for the inherent goods they represent (love, joy, intimacy, and more) but, like the ancient Romans, we should be able to honour such relationships without redefining the bedrock institution of *marriage* in a way that sidelines the very thing that makes it bedrock.

Whatever happens in the coming months, we should give each other permission to profoundly disagree about these important matters *and* strive to respect and understand each other all the same. We all still have to get along the day after any new legislation.