

A Biblical View of Marriage

Introduction

In recent years, there has been much debate over the Australian Marriage Act. In particular, to whether the definition of marriage should be extended to include same-sex relationships. What has intrigued me about the debate, however, is not so much the issue of same-sex marriage, but rather that much of the debate in Christian circles has assumed acceptance, and defence, of the status quo.

As a consequence, one could easily conclude that the Marriage Act is in some way consistent with a Christian theology of marriage, and that there is no problem with Christian clergy acting as representatives of the State, in the conduct of wedding services.

But was (and is) the Marriage Act consistent with Christian theology?

A History of Marriage: The Bible

Well, from an Old Testament perspective, we are told that marriage is a universal gift of God (Genesis 2:24). And at its very simplest, marriage is the coming together of two people (a man and a woman), consecrated by sexual union, in which children can be born and nurtured. Indeed, there were no other demands by God.

It shouldn't surprise us, then, that in the case of Isaac, when the servant arrived home with Rebekah, Isaac 'took' her into his mother's tent and 'she became his wife' (Genesis 24:67). In other words by mutual agreement, they consecrated their decision to live in a permanent marriage relationship.

Now, of course, this example makes nonsense of the idea of 'living-in-sin', the need for marriage ceremonies, the regulating of ceremonies, and even the idea of 'de-facto' relationships. Marriage is simply God's gift of a permanent intimate relationship between a man and a woman, and it exceeds any requirements that mankind imposes on it, whether for legal or cultural reasons.

Having said that, it didn't take long for some sort of celebration to be added to marriage (at least for the wealthy). And in Jacob's case, a community celebration preceded his intended union with Rachel (Genesis 29:21-30). But again, there is no record of any actual wedding ceremony. (And throughout the bible there are many references to wedding celebrations, while being conspicuously silent in regard to any ceremonies.)

We can easily conclude, then, that in the bible, there is a history of the growth of community celebrations around the act of marriage, but no indication of the need for a wedding ceremony. Indeed, the public celebration would simply have been followed by the very private act of 'marriage'.

And this neatly fits in with the experiences of Ignatius later in the first century A.D. Because he knew much about couples becoming engaged (which included pledges, rings, dowries, veils, the joining of hands, and the kiss), but was remarkably silent on the need—or practice—of any wedding ceremony itself.

A History of Marriage: Post New Testament

Furthermore, the earliest historical records of any wedding ceremony date back only to the third or fourth centuries A.D. And in England in the Middle Ages, government control over relationships had developed to the point where people had to seek permission to live in a marriage relationship. But, for the majority, no ceremony was required at all.

As a consequence, in the course of history, wedding ceremonies—at least for the majority—have only been a relatively recent invention. And the requirement for a ceremony is probably more to do with government control and regulation than it has to do with God's gift. Furthermore, the church's involvement in such ceremonies is probably more to do with their entanglement with the State, than a desire to express a biblical position.

So if God's gift and the Marriage Act are so very different, why does the church participate in the administration of the Marriage Act at all?

After all, the State requires certain paperwork and an approved ceremony of some description before a couple can be considered 'married'. But the Bible makes no such requirement. Indeed, the bible tells us that marriage is a gift from God for all mankind and provides no requirement for the need for a ceremony. It only comments on the development of community celebrations prior to the very private act of marriage.

Who Can Marry Who

And the basic theology of marriage is not the only thing that conflicts with the current marriage act. There is also the issue of who can marry who. For the description of prohibited relationships in the Marriage Act is very different to those detailed under the Law of Moses.

Indeed, the Marriage Act allows for marriage relationships prohibited by God's law, and it prohibits marriage relationships deemed acceptable by God's law (and vice versa). As a consequence, the Marriage Act is clearly in conflict with the Bible and Judeo-Christian tradition.

Who Can Marry Who: Polygamous Relationships

One such example is the concept of polygamy—the marriage of a man to two or more wives. It is a practice not unknown in Australia, and indeed is part of the culture of many migrants to Australia, particularly from Africa and the Middle East. Furthermore, the biblical practice of Levirate Marriage is also an important part of some people's religious beliefs and practices. And yet, despite the practice being acceptable under the Law of Moses, it is currently a prosecutable offence under Australian law.

Now I have often heard it said, 'But that was in the Old Testament. In New Testament times things were quite different.' But even if monogamy had become more the norm in New Testament times, polygamy was not totally unheard of.

Indeed, the apostle Paul's only stated objection to polygamy was in the context of church leadership. As a confirmed bachelor himself, he was very strong on the need to remain single

(1 Corinthians 7:1, 32). As a consequence, his only concern was that a man with multiple wives would become too distracted to be a leader in the church (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).

Who Can Marry Who: Blood Relations (and Beyond)

Furthermore, with the Marriage Act, there is only a short list of prohibited relationships. It excludes relationships between ancestors and descendants, and brothers and sisters. It also excludes relationships with adopted children, which for the purpose of the act are considered to have the same relationship as those more naturally born. But that is about as far as the exclusions go.

On the other hand, the Bible's list of excluded relationships is far more detailed. Yes, it includes relationships between parents and children, and brothers and sisters. In other words it picks up the same blood relationships as excluded by the Marriage Act. But then it goes further to include any family relative. It also excludes certain non-blood relationships, like father's wife (who is not your mother), aunt by marriage, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, and wife's sister.

Now, of course, one could easily ask, 'Why is there such a difference in the list of prohibited relationships? Why does the State principally exclude immediate blood-relationships, while the bible's list is far more comprehensive?' Well, the answer is quite simple.

The list of prohibited relationships in the Marriage Act reflects more modern cultural values. And those values are very different to the values described in the pages of the Bible, irrespective of the same-sex marriage debate.

The Marriage Act has as its primary focus on blood-relations. As a consequence, its focus is on the need to avoid problems associated with in-breeding. On the other hand, the Bible's lists suggest a greater concern for the functioning of families. And that is confirmed by the fact that the biblical rules were given by God within the context of laws intended to maintain a healthy community.

The Church's Defence of the Marriage Act

When it comes to the Church and marriage, then, there are many questions that it needs to ask regarding its involvement with the State. After all:

1. Should the church be limiting marriage to only those people who have made commitments to each other in a ceremony approved by the State?
2. Should the church be rejecting those who choose to live in polygamous relationships? And
3. Should the church be limiting its understanding of marriage—to exclude blood relatives only—so that it misses God's concern about healthy families and healthy communities?

Now the answers to these three questions should be: No, No, and No. But in which case, the question still stands: 'Why is the church participating in the execution of the Marriage Act? And why is the church so often seen to be defending the act, rather than actively pointing out its deficiencies?'

Furthermore, if the church is seen to be giving tacit approval to relationships excluded by God, how does it expect to be taken seriously on other matters? Indeed, the whole situation leaves the church open to accusations of hypocrisy.

Summary

At the heart of the matter, then, is that God has given us principles for healthy families and healthy communities.

Some might not understand the reasoning behind all of God's rules, and others might like to change the rules to suit themselves. But if God is to be taken seriously, we need to accept that he may well know things that we don't. And as a consequence, it's not what you or I want that's important, it's what God wants. If we deviate from his path, we leave ourselves open to dire consequences. But if we stick to God's plans, we have a recipe for a healthy community.

Is the Defence of the Marriage Act Valid?

So the question remains: 'Should the church continue to defend the Marriage Act? Should it be complicit in maintaining an act that fails to meet God's standards of marriage?' Well, I believe the answer is 'No'. Not only on theological grounds, but on pastoral grounds too.

As members of God's church, we are supposed to reflect God's values. We are supposed to care for, promote, and support people based on God's values, regardless of any inherited cultural beliefs or practices, whether they are enshrined in legislation or not. As a consequence, the church should withdraw its involvement in any marriage ceremony conducted under the current Australian Marriage Act.

It is an action which, no doubt, will cause much pain. But it is a necessary one, if the church is to be true to God, and be true to itself. Because if the current Marriage Act falls well short of God's standards—which it does—the church should be speaking out about the current act, not supporting or defending it.

References for excluded relationships:

Exodus 22:16-17, 19, Leviticus 18:6-23; 20:10-21; Deuteronomy 22:30

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