

REDEFINING MARRIAGE

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27) The social values that same sex couples exhibit in their daily lives are indistinguishable from those of their neighbours. We need to acknowledge the loyalty, commitment and devotion of all people who live their lives in a way which benefits society. There are many forms of civil union which contribute to our neighbourhood and make our community a safer and better place. These forms may include the daughter looking after her aging father or the mother looking after her child who has a disability. The variations are endless. The present debate is not about the worth to the community of same sex unions.

The Federal law in Australia has already been changed to give same sex partners the same legal rights as those who are married. And in most States same sex partners already have the right to officially register their unions. The present debate is not about equality and non-discrimination.

The present debate is about the definition of marriage. The question we need to ask is why society has an interest in continuing to secure marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman.

Last August, in an extraordinary show of unity, more than fifty national leaders of Christian Churches endorsed a document on marriage as a legal institution that promotes and protects the identity of children and their internationally recognised right to know, have access to and be nurtured by both their mother and father.

Marriage is far more than just romance and must focus on establishing a relationship in which children are nurtured by both their mother and their father. That marriage is between a man and a woman has stood across millennia and all cultures and is very important if not sacred to a lot of people. Importantly those who value the definition of marriage hold it deeply. These people have the right to be heard.

It is about securing as a community value the right of a child to a mother and father and placing an expectation on parents that wherever possible they have a responsibility to stay together for that child and to provide the equal love of a mother and father in his or her nurturing and growth. Marriage as currently defined does this.

There are same sex households in which there are children, either from previous relationships or through the use of the technology. Nationally same-sex couple families represent one in a thousand couples with children. Surrogacy makes it possible for same sex male households to parent children. The law copes with those eventualities by defining and securing the child's relationship to parents or substitute parents. However the reality is that a same sex relationship does not generate children and the child always comes from outside the relationship. A complex matrix of parental relationships is formed of genetic, gestational or birth mother and social or substitute parents.

A child's relationship to both mother and father is inherent to marriage. Children conceived by other means may find themselves with people in parental roles who are in a same sex relationship, but such relationships are not the origin of the child. It is likely for children to be loved and nurtured in such a household, but however good that nurturing, it will not provide the biological link and security of identity and relationship that marriage naturally demands and confirms.

If marriage were redefined, the law would teach that marriage is fundamentally about adults' emotional unions, about romance only, not complementary bodily union or generating and nurturing children. What is at stake is to hold to an ideal that seeks to ensure that a child has both a mother and a father. That it sometimes breaks down or that there are exceptions does not make marriage any less ideal. The bodily union of mutual love that is integral to marriage helps to create stable and harmonious conditions suitable for children, and the children can look back to an origin in the love of their parents.

It is one thing to say that the law has nothing to do with what two men or two women do in their private life, it is quite another to change the law to promote those relationships. If marriage is redefined, then that is what we are going to have to teach and affirm to our children and in our schools.

The revisionist case reduces marriage to a matter of choice and love between adults only. If the definition of marriage is changed, that will affect all of us, children in particular, because 'marriage' will primarily serve the interests of adults.

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