

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Why the Definition of Marriage Matters

On 17 March 2015, the Presbyterian Church (USA) [PCUSA] voted to change the definition of marriage within the PCUSA constitution to include same-sex marriage. The language of the constitution was changed from “a man and a woman” to “two people, traditionally a man and a woman.” The PCUSA thus joins other denominations/religious associations that permit their clergy to perform same-sex marriages: the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Quakers, and the Unitarian Universalist Association of Churches, and both Reform and Conservative Judaism. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America permits individual ministers to decide for themselves whether they will perform same-sex marriages. Obviously, those within the theologically liberal wing of Protestantism as well as those within the theologically liberal wing of Judaism no longer take seriously the words of Scripture when it comes to marriage. How should we think about this incredibly rapid accommodation to the shifting winds of cultural change within Western Civilization?

I cannot resist the biting, but accurate comments in the minority Supreme Court opinion in *United States v. Windsor* (2013), written by Chief Justice Roberts and Associate Justice Scalia. Roberts and Scalia both acknowledged how the majority opinion of the Court was painting supporters of marriage as it has been defined for millennia as “bigots” who sought to “demean,” “disparage,” “humiliate,” and “injure” same-sex couples. Thus, in a sweeping decision, the Supreme Court of the United States redefined “an aspect of marriage that had been unquestioned in our society for most of its existence—indeed, had been unquestioned in virtually all societies for virtually all of human history,” while simultaneously defining proponents of traditional marriage as “enemies of the human race” [Quoted in *Counter Culture* by David Platt, pp. 132-133].

That the Supreme Court of the United States should turn its back on millennia of teaching and practice about marriage is perhaps understandable. Long ago the Court and much of law gave up the proposition that there are absolute, unchangeable dimensions to law. But that the PCUSA has done so is absolutely stunning!! It is turning its back on God’s Word, on the Reformation and on the sound doctrine of genuine, biblical Christianity.

What follows is an outline of what the Bible teaches about marriage, its sacredness and its purpose. It is in outline form because I taught this material at my church, where, in my retirement, I serve a part-time teaching role.

The Foundation of Marriage: God's Creation Ordinance, Genesis 1:26-27; 2:18-25

I. God created the human body and gender as a dimension of being in His image (Gen. 1:26-27)—“male and female He created them.”

- Gender is a specific, intentional feature of God's creation.
- Two complementary sexes (male and female) is the first mentioned fact in connection with the “image of God” concept.
- In Matthew 19:4-6, Jesus cites Genesis 1:27 as the normal pattern for marriage that God expects.
- The Apostle Paul also cites Genesis 1:27 as the norm in Romans 1:23-27.
- The Creation Ordinance and both Jesus and Paul's citation of this Ordinance strongly imply sexual intercourse as a bond between a man and a woman brought together in a “one-flesh” union.

II. God created woman as a complement to man in the marriage bond, Genesis 2:18-24

- The importance of the term “helper” (*'ezer*), which means she adds strength to the areas where the man is weak—and vice versa.
- The result is a complementary union of two different human beings (“male and female He created them”), each with unique physical, emotional, and psychological characteristics. The result is a marriage bond in which both are stronger and more capable of serving God together in their integrity.

III. The One-Flesh Principle, Genesis 2:24

- Genesis 2:22-24 connects the creation of Eve from a part of Adam's body with the one-flesh sexual union between a man and a woman in marriage. Note the important term “therefore” in v. 24. It is the union of two constituent parts—male and female—into a sexual whole.
- Jesus stresses this connection between the two different sexes—“male and female”—when He addresses marriage in Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-8.
- The logic of sexual intercourse requires a sexual complement. The male is incomplete without the female and the female is incomplete without the male.

IV. God performed the first marriage

- The result is Genesis 2:25—there is no shame, no self-centeredness or selfishness; only total innocence and other-centeredness. This is God’s ideal and His goal.

Concluding Assumptions about Marriage from Scripture:

1. Marriage is the fundamental institution God created for organized civilization. It is tied to His creation and His purpose for the human race as His image-bears who have dominion authority over His world.
2. Marriage is monogamous and heterosexual, and, from Jesus’ perspective, permanent—“what God has joined together, let no man separate”, Matthew 19:6.
3. Marriage is a commitment before God, regarded in Malachi 2:14 as a “covenant” commitment over which God stands as a “witness.” Indeed, Jesus states in Matthew 19:6 that “God has joined together” this union. The man and the woman have a new status before the Lord—they are husband and wife together.
4. It is therefore logical to assume that some kind of public commitment is a necessary part of marriage. Society must regard the man and the woman as a couple, now bound together; they are no longer single. Therefore, sexual intercourse alone does not constitute a marriage. Cohabitation alone does not constitute a marriage. There must be some kind of public commitment recognized by God and by the community.
5. Marriage is a metaphor, an archetype of the covenantal relationship between Jesus Christ and His church—see Ephesians 5:32. Our goal should thus be to build Ephesians 5:32 marriages.

See Laurie Goodstein in the New York Times (17 March 2015) and David Platt, *A Compassionate Call to Counter Culture*, pp. 131-156.