

Evangelical Alliance Marriage briefing

March 2012

What are the government doing?

The Government has announced plans to change marriage by extending it to same-sex couples. A consultation was published in March 2012 on the proposed changes. Following the consultation – which closes on June 14 – the Government will respond and is expected to then introduce legislation into parliament, which will probably take place in 2013 at the earliest.

What does the Bible say about marriage?

Marriage is part of God's plan for the world. It began at creation (Genesis 1:27, 2:20-25). It is emphasised throughout the Bible, and Jesus firmly reminds his followers of the vital and special role marriage plays:

“Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6)

When marriages flourish they benefit the couple, the family and all of the community. As the building block on which stable societies are built, marriage is something that should be honoured by all (Hebrews 13:4).

What is marriage?

In the Bible, and throughout Christian tradition, the primary focus with regard to sexual relationships is the institution of marriage. This is a loving relationship between one man and one woman that is exclusive and intended to be life-long. It is not a political creation or social construction, but a good gift of God, given in creation, and a form of human covenant that acts as a sign of God's covenant love and faithfulness. Marriage is the only legitimate context for the total, self-giving, love which is expressed in sexual union.

The Book of Common Prayer succinctly expresses the biblical role of marriage as: *“The union of husband and wife in heart, body and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in this knowledge and love of the Lord.*

It is not our place to change what was clearly taught by Jesus, and through the Bible; that marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman. The differences between men and women are not accidental; they are part of God's design for humanity. The reality of male and female biology tells us that same-sex relationships cannot ever be the same as marriage between a man and a woman. In simple terms, same-sex couples cannot naturally have children.

Although not all married couples have children, the sexual union that produces them is at the core of historical and universal definitions of marriage. Indeed, for the relationship to be classed as marriage, the state requires that it has to be consummated.

Why is this important for society?

Because marriage works

Across the world, the vast majority of countries are committed to marriage between a man and a woman because they see it as a fundamental building block of civil society. They recognise that although other relationships exist in society, and although not every marriage produces children, a mother and father brought together in marriage provides the very best support for a child's development and identity.

All the evidence shows that children do best with a married mother and father. Making marriage gender neutral would hamper a child's chance to form intimate and appropriate relationships with both men and women.

The public does not want marriage to be tinkered with. In fact, according to a ComRes poll in March 2012, 70 per cent of people wanted marriage to remain as the life long union of a man and a woman.

Because marriage is unique

Our society, like most others, has always upheld marriage as the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. That's what it says in the law.

In a disposable, consumer culture where sexual relationships have largely become a matter of individual choice rather than being a social institution, the marriage vows offer an alternative: a commitment to each other in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, until death. Taken seriously, marriage is not an easy ride. It's far more than a symbol of romantic love; it demands putting each other first, through the good times and the bad.

That's why marriage is the best place for the vulnerability of sex. And it's why it's the best place for providing the love and security that children need to flourish.

Marriage works and we should not play politics with it. The role of the state is to protect and support marriage for future generations. It was around before politics and must come before any short term political calculations. Marriage is not only instinctive, it is an intrinsic foundation for society. It is an expression of our fundamental humanity. Throughout history, states and societies have cherished and protected marriage.

Hasn't marriage already changed?

In recent years, marriage has become more disposable and more elastic, and this vital social institution has been weakened. The ease and acceptance with which marriages are dissolved through adultery and divorce, and sidelined through cohabitation has led to a much reduced vision for marriage.

But just because something has been abused, doesn't make it worthless. Marriage is more than this. It's a good thing for society, and despite the fact that more than 40 per cent of children are now born outside marriage, it should still be maintained as the gold standard for raising them.

How would these changes affect traditionally married couples?

The current debate is not about equality, or homosexuality. It is about trying to change what marriage is. This attempt at redefinition affects us all because marriage is such a vital good for society, so weaker marriages would certainly damage all of society.

The Government are planning on abolishing marriage as we now know it. In its place they want to construct a new, gender neutral, legal fiction and pretend it is marriage. This means there will be no legal term or distinct status for the male-female relationship that is widely accepted as the best place for raising a family and strongest framework for society. This affects the rights and status of millions of married couples.

The proposals are about privatising marriage. Marriage cannot be given away to the free market in this way. It's not just another commodity that can be traded with consumer choice on one side of the scale or political gain on the other. If marriage is sold off in this way, who knows what other bidders will come along wanting a slice of the action. To change this would be to pull the foundation away from the marriages of millions for the preference of a few.

Aren't these proposed changes just about promoting more equality?

Actually no, they are quite unfair. If these changes are allowed there will be two types of marriage, religious and civil. This isn't a distinction that currently exists – at the moment marriage is marriage. The only difference is in the ceremony.

Civil partnerships were introduced in 2004 and they provide all the legal and civil protections that married couples enjoy. Creating a new form of marriage would not remedy any injustice. This was how the government of the day intended it when civil partnerships were introduced. The former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith described civil partnerships as mirroring “as fully as possible the rights and responsibilities enjoyed by those who can marry and... [using] civil marriage as a template for the processes, rights and responsibilities that go with civil partnership”.

The Government is adamant that civil partnerships will remain as an institution solely available to same sex couples. The reason for this is the cost implication for the tax-payer of opening up civil partnerships to heterosexual couples, which is estimated at around £5billion. These proposals are not only unfair to married couples and future generations who would aspire to marriage, they are not about equality.

What will be the impact if these changes are allowed to go through?

Legal Changes

If the Government goes ahead with these planned changes, the legal and cultural consequences will be huge – not least because of the mountain of centuries-old law that will need to be updated. Some of these laws have served the country well for nearly 800 years. The proposals will mean that the terms husband and wife will become redundant, as will mother and father – probably to be replaced, as they have in Spain, with ‘Progenitor A and B’.

They will have to change the laws about adultery and consummation, and whatever they do, the current basis of marriage as the sexual union of a man and a woman will have to be removed.

Religious liberty

If same-sex 'marriage' is introduced, schools would be obliged to impose views that would conflict with parental belief. Teachers who hold to the orthodox understanding of marriage and continue to teach that it is solely between a man and a woman would be at odds with the law.

Would parents be able to withdraw their children from lessons where marriage is taught as between any two people? In fact, if these proposals go through, will anyone be able to hold to the traditional view of marriage?

Millions of people who don't or won't support the redefinition will find themselves under pressure by the state to conform, and it is difficult to see how the government could legislate to allow for different understandings of what marriage is.

Further erosion

Any safeguards that the Government offers for religious weddings would be meaningless. Each time similar safeguards have been promised, they have shortly after been rendered useless by newer laws, thereby undermining religious freedom and conscience in order to satisfy the rights of other groups. The role of hate crime and discrimination legislation would not only introduce a 'chill factor', it would also put anyone defending marriage as being in reality between a man and a woman at permanent risk of prosecution. It is also likely that pressure would immediately follow to extend religious ceremonies as a human right.

If marriage is changed in this generation, there is no way of knowing how else it could be changed in the future. By undermining the historic definition of marriage and opening it up to what consumer choice demands, there is no reason to think it will not be redefined indefinitely for any other form of relationship which demands to be recognised as a 'marriage'.

Conclusion

The proposals are not only unnecessary and unfair, they are also undemocratic. Redefining marriage was not mentioned in the party manifestoes. As such, they lack a democratic mandate for introduction. They will give to a few what they want but take from very many what they deeply value. Marriage has served society well and will do in the future. At a time of huge social challenges, marriage needs to be protected and promoted, not redefined and rebranded.

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