

NEVER MIND SAME-SEX COUPLES, IT IS HETEROSEXUALS WHO HAVE REDEFINED 'MARRIAGE'

Thu 4 June 2015



This article was *originally published by ABC Religion and Ethics* on 3 June 2015.

As an Anglican priest with long experience of the "wedding industry," I seldom have anything to do with what conservatives call "traditional marriage".

Cohabiting couples may reach a point where a more formal arrangement beckons. This may or may not have to do with the "choice" of having children.

Some couples from the wider public still seek a church wedding. And in church it is typically one size fits all. We require solemn promises for life, fidelity regardless of feelings, and children viewed as a gift not a choice.

Yet romanticism is all about the intensity and uniqueness of personal experience, and the language of traditional marriage contains precious little of that. Where in the lexicon of heterosexual romance can we accommodate a liturgical celebration of God's plan for creation, let alone sacramental participation in Christ's love for his Church?

So much for "traditional marriage".

Christians wishing to refute same-sex marriage claims point to our place in God's wider purposes for humanity and all creation, using arguments from nature, scripture, or both. But the postmodern individual, whose imagination is shaped by commodity culture and the popular brand outlet of romanticism, questions the "relevance" of such big-picture considerations. It is simply about being "in love" and wanting to be together. Yet divorce statistics show how poorly marriage fares on such a basis in today's over-hyped marketplace of desire.

If the conception of children and their carriage to full term has to fit in with our "lifestyle choices," and if the romance that sweeps us into marriage might just as readily sweep us into a new relationship, in what sense is ours a "traditional

marriage"? Yet these are widespread heterosexual norms in our society, and it is these that the churches are regularly blessing.

Catholic teaching on marriage emphasises both the unitive and procreative dimensions of married sexuality. Protestant and Anglican marriage rites emphasise the quality of mutual help and society between husband and wife, along with the procreation and nurture of children.

So today's companionate marriage does have roots in the interpersonal dimension of traditional marriage. But that unitive dimension still sets the marriage bond in a larger context of meaning and purpose. It cannot be reduced to what Erich Fromm called the "egoism *a deux*" to which today's romantic coupledom can tend.

As for the nurture of children, the heterosexual mainstream is no longer particularly "traditional." Children by choice, conceived by any one of a number of means, who may end up living in two or more married households as they grow up, are not experiencing "traditional marriage." If children need a mother and a father for their wellbeing, tell that to the heterosexual community.

The heterosexual community is the site of widespread abortion, child abuse and abandonment. Two mums or two dads is not the worst fate that might await us on our journey from conception to adulthood.

Some conservatives argue, perhaps cynically, that the push for same-sex marriage is a spoiling manoeuvre, intended as an attack on traditional values. I have heard it referred to as payback against a hetero-normative mainstream that has regularly oppressed LGBTI people.

Will the same traditional expectations of fidelity apply to gay couples, some ask. Once again, the question needs to be put to the heterosexual world first, where adultery and "serial polygamy" are more "relevant" to a culture of romance and sexual adventure than long-term marital fidelity.

Long-established married couples have done better at fidelity and stickability, leaving the romance and "blended families" to younger people. But there are issues regarding the underlying understanding of marriage in that older demographic, too.

Some "traditional marriage" advocates value being married for the social status that it conferred in former times. My own (adopted) mother was very pleased to be married and for the dignity that a confected family life conferred on her. Divorced people, spinsters and those who simply lived together (in those days, largely out of sight) were of lower status.

For those who think this way, "marriage equality" for LGBTI people must seem like a cheapening of the brand. "Who do they think they are?"

Here is one more instance of how we humans take a gift and vocation from God and turn it into a vehicle for self-justification at the expense of others. If heterosexual marriage in an older demographic is viewed in terms of social status, then the LGBTI community in seeking "marriage equality" is once again simply following a heterosexual norm.

I believe in marriage for spiritual reasons. I see it in theological terms, as a sacramental witness against a culture in which people are commodified and undervalued. What a comforting sign of our worth, that someone would devote a lifetime to knowing, loving and supporting us, through thick and thin.

When romantic individualism undermines the stability of families and communities, sundering heart from mind and will and leaving us essentially isolated, marriage stands for a richer view of human worth. When marriage becomes a mark of social status, so that "marriage equality" is as threatening to our accustomed pretensions as any other form of equality, the sacrament is a reminder that marriage is a divine vocation to self-giving, not self-assertion.

As a Christian, I believe that God calls most human beings into this depth of long-term, risky openness out of love for us. It is best for us, for our societies, for our children, and for our world. It is a sacramental sign of what God is like.

If same-sex marriage represents a threat to this reality, then heterosexual marriage, as it is widely understood nowadays, has paved the way.

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell is Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University, Canberra, and Canon Theologian of the Canberra-Goulburn Anglican Diocese.