

Gay Marriage: In Context

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I recently overheard a colleague say that though he is not against gay people, he does not believe they should get married. Yes, this ever-present issue continues well into 2010 and continues to rear its controversial head. And so I have decided to put my two cents in. I do understand that people are afraid of what is unfamiliar, and I also understand that people are afraid of change, but the ironic part is the fact that marriage and its infrastructure, so to speak, have always been in a state or process of adaptation. While my colleague was essentially concluding that if gay people legally marry, the institution of marriage will forever be altered, he was unfortunately overlooking the fact that marriage has historically done just that- changed, adapted and evolved.

In her new book, *Commitment*, Elizabeth Gilbert chronicles the evolution of marriage and logically concludes that change is an inherent part of its meaning. Historically, marriage has gone through several "versions". While marriage today is defined as a sacred union between two, non-related people (and with gender of course under consideration), for much of history it was seen as a union between one man and several women, or two men (as in Ancient Rome), as well as between cross-cousins or even uncles and nieces (as in some parts of India and Africa). Other variations, so to speak, have existed, all with different purposes, including legal union for mere procreation, social class, money/property, and/or safety. There have also been periods in history where marriage was not even considered sacred; in fact, with the rise of Christianity, marriage as an institution was not a noteworthy endeavor. During this time, Christian asceticism favored virginity and sexual abstinence over marriage. In the centuries following, marriage came more under the rulings of the Church and many Christianized countries had very barbaric marital practices with women having less social standing than slaves. More modern iterations of marriage include the Oneida Community, founded by John Noyes in 1948, who started a group marriage called "complex marriage" in which theoretically every woman was married to every man. And although it was officially outlawed before 1900, most people are familiar with the Mormon practice of polygamy. Today, marriage is typically a function of dating, romance and love. In summary, marriage has served, historically, several purposes. So the question remains; what is its current purpose? It appears, given the ever changing nature of our society, and the current challenges faced today by most families, that opening up the institution of marriage to gay people may just be the timely solution that we need.

Most current marriages today grow out of dating, defined by researchers as an individual courtship; this is in stark contrast to historical reasons for marriage including protection of the family profit or bloodline. Unfortunately, modern dating creates a facade of intimacy, commitment and compatibility and breeds false friendships and overemphasis on attraction, factors inherent to *unsuccessful* marriages. In fact, marital researchers note that dating and its counterpart, cohabitation, are huge risk factors for low marital satisfaction and marital divorce (as discussed in Olson & DeFrain, 2006) because they falsely prepare couples for healthy marriages. More specifically, dating

emphasizes falling in love, sexual attraction, and pleasure, as opposed to friendship, communication, stamina, emotional stability and compatibility, the latter of which constitute strengths in successful relationships (as discussed in Olson & DeFrain, 2006). Not surprisingly then, current divorce rates are significantly high (half of first marriages end in divorce; 60% of second marriages end in divorce; one in three marriages ends in the first 10 years; one in five ends within 5 years, Centers for Disease Control, 2001). Furthermore, other challenges also confront modern families, including a rise in single-parent households (which also increases the likelihood that single moms will be living in poverty), instability of family relationships due to financial threats or increased family violence and drug abuse, and other intense stressors. It seems to me that one solution to many of these problems is to ensure that children are reared in households with loving, committed, stable parents. And so perhaps the gender of the parent(s) should be irrelevant.

Or actually, gender could be especially relevant. We might take note of the fact that gay and lesbian couples have been found to have several strengths that opposite-sex couples do not: they have high emotional connection, high role flexibility, equalitarian decision making, and effective communication skills (Kurdek, 1998, 2001, 2003; Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996; Laird & Green, 1996). These components predict high marital satisfaction and duration. And, these are all good things for kids. I understand that some people are opposed to gay marriage because they are afraid that gay parents will be “bad” for children. But again, if we are look at the data, there is NO evidence that being parented by a gay couple can have a harmful effect on a child. In fact, because gay and lesbian couples often have children by choice, they are very often caring and effective parents (Hare, 1994), with high rates of involvement and with children having similar psychological well-being to children of traditional parents.

We should also consider the general advantages of marriage as well. Married people live longer and have healthier lives overall as compared to unmarried or divorced people (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married people also report, as compared to their non-married counterparts, greater happiness, financial success, and decreased domestic abuse. And for its impact on children overall, marriage increases their well-being and academic success.

Conceivably then what we need *is* change. I personally appreciate that marriage has evolved (for example, I am pleased to report that today, it is a crime in all 50 states for a husband to rape his wife). Perhaps the very change that we need is to open marriage up to people who *want* marriage, who appreciate the meaning of marriage, and who have the determination to be married. Or at least have the opportunity to give it their best shot like everyone else. Given the rates of divorce and the impact of divorce on children, as well as other challenges we face as a society, how can we say that two people who want to commit their lives to each other, who are determined to work hard at their marriage, and who have likely taken the time to communicate about marriage is a bad thing?

Given that in today's society, *it takes a village*, why not welcome all who want to join?

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