

Title: Unique union
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I DID something really odd the other day. I looked up the dictionary definition of marriage, just to make sure that my understanding was not too off-line. I was relieved to find that it is called the legal union of a man with a woman for life. It is a public, lifelong and exclusive relationship. There is no hint in the dictionary that the word can extend to two men or two women in a public, lifelong and exclusive relationship, says Peter Jensen.

Of course, dictionaries change to mirror the times, and governments do all sorts of things with words, but changing the definition of marriage would be as fatuous as declaring that Perth is Sydney or that the moon is made of ice cream. We would then need a new word to describe the reality that occurs when a man and a woman publicly promise each other to live in lifelong and exclusive relationship, “in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others so long as you both shall live”.

Whether we like it or not, a unique union occurs, based on the fact that one is a man and the other is a woman. No other arrangement is the same.

Our confusion about this does not arise merely from the ideological push of recent decades by some gay people for recognition and acceptance. It is true that this has been cleverly and powerfully managed. The result is that if anyone speaks in public about the moral issues raised by gay sex, they are instantly branded homophobic or fascist. No serious debate is allowed. Free speech on this matter comes at a personal cost that few are willing to pay any more. There are serious questions that we are not permitted to ask in public.

But the state of marriage in our community is not merely a gay issue. The extreme individualism of Western culture has encouraged men and women to seek multiple sexual partners, to engage in sex in early adolescence and to isolate marriage from family as well as relationship. We are so shy of the commitment that promises involve that we have lost the art of forming relationships that will lead to marriage. By exalting our desire to be our own selves, we have created a deep hunger for satisfying relationships, for actual love.

If I understand the evidence correctly, this freedom we have granted ourselves is not good for us, for our children or for the community as a whole. We are far better off, generally speaking, living in families founded by a man and a woman who have made initial public promises of lifelong fidelity. It is the family so constituted that is the primary source for the love and care without which we cannot survive. It is this family that best meets our relationship needs. It is this family that provides children with the experience of the interaction of human maleness and femaleness. It is the children of this family who we may expect will look after their aged, lonely and sick.

Of course not all families are like that and no family is perfect. It so happens that for all sorts of good reasons men and women do not begin or sustain families of this nature. But if we ask ourselves what is best for the community as a whole, what should public policy encourage most of all, it will be the family so constituted.

If this is so, what sort of men and women do we need to be? You do not have to be in pastoral ministry long to realise that the biblical teaching against adultery is profoundly right.

The awful consequences of unfaithfulness continue long after the sin is committed. What the Bible summons us to do - and our society has been for a long time based on this insight - is to discipline our sexual lives so that we relate properly to other people and do not merely please ourselves.

Of course this involves self-sacrifice. But the benefits of channelling our sexual energies within marriage are huge for ourselves, for our families and for our communities. Indeed, a person who has not learned the path of sexual discipline will be a poor marriage partner.

Sexual discipline is as essential within marriage as it is outside: we are meant to love each other “in sickness and in health”, for example.

I may be right or wrong about all this, but it seems to me that we would be better off spending a lot more time and energy thinking about the moral meaning of marriage between a man and a woman than agitating on behalf of relationships that mimic, but can never replicate, it.

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