

Why should Christians speak on this contested topic?

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The marriage debate is heating up in Australia. There has been lots of talk about a plebiscite (a people's vote) on changing the Marriage Act to include same sex couples. At present it isn't clear what the timing will be, or even if a plebiscite will be approved by Parliament. Whatever the details, Christians should think carefully about how they get involved in the discussion and how they vote if the plebiscite happens.

This paper is written to help Christians, and especially members of the Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW, to think about same-sex marriage and how to respond. Most of this paper is about why and how Christians should think about the debate. It is not written to set out a case which would convince the wider society, but to help you think as a Christian. The paper finishes with some suggestions about what you might say to friends and family about the issue.

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Why marriage matters

The idea that God sets a pattern for sexuality and marriage marks the gap between how Christians think about sex, and common Australian assumptions. It is common in Australian society to hold that as long as no one is hurt, you are free to conduct your sexual activities as you wish. Our culture places a premium on self-expression, freedom and pleasure — and assumes that these lead to real fulfilment.

The Christian view, from the Bible, is that God has a pattern for sex and marriage that is good for humans, and which we should follow. Fulfilment in human life comes from living God's way, not our own.

These two very different ways of looking at life and marriage help to explain why the same sex marriage debate is so frustrating for Christians (and no doubt why we frustrate other people). We are starting from different convictions. Christians are countercultural, not just in our view of marriage, but in the way we work out what is right and wrong.

The Christian view of marriage is that it is a basic building block for society, designed by God for our good (Gen 2:23-25). When God instituted marriage, he gave a complex gift, holding together companionship, sex and children. Marriage is the most intimate and intense human relationship, designed as a committed

partnership between a man and a woman. It is sealed by sexual expression which has profound emotional and spiritual depth and creates a bond that helps secure the foundation of family life. The sexual relationship which binds married intimacy is also how children are conceived. This threefold cord of marriage, sex and children is basic to human life.

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Together, marriage and the family life that comes from it nurture human life. Human responsibilities to others begin with family relationships (Gen 4:9b; Ex 20:12,14). Religious life begins in family life (Gen 4:3–4; 8:20; 12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7; Job 1:5). Our care for the world is fulfilled through families, as husbands and wives work together and raise children, developing human culture in God’s world and passing it on to successive generations (Gen 1:26–28; 2:22–25). This is not to say human flourishing can only take place in families; yet where family life fails, human flourishing is crippled.

Marriage is God’s design: a lifelong commitment of a man and a woman to live with and love each other (Matt 19:3–9). It is intended to nurture intimate companionship and provide the context for children to be born and raised. That is the definition of marriage, established by God and humans are not free to simply redefine it. So-called “same sex” marriage is not marriage.

This threefold cord interweaving means that sex is for marriage alone. The Bible does say that homosexual sex is wrong (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:18–32; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 1 Tim 1:9–10), it says just as strongly that all sexual relationships outside of marriage are wrong ((Ex 20:14; Lev 18:20; Deut 5:18; Prov 6:29, 32; Hos 4:2; Matt 5:27; 15:19; Rom 2:22; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; 1 Th 4:3–6; Heb 13:4). The general term used in the New Testament for “sexual immorality” refers to all sexual activity outside of marriage. The Bible has far more to say about unfaithfulness in marriage than it does about homosexuality.

The threefold cord also means that God’s pattern is that children are one of the purposes of marriage and children should be born and raised in a marriage. Of course there are times when that is not how things work out. Some couples cannot have children, for all sorts of reasons parents have raise children alone, sometimes parents cannot or will not care for their children. All of these are sad situations, and everyone affected by them needs appropriate support. These situations and our responses do not disprove the God ordained connection between marriage, sex and children, they simply show that one of the effects of the fall is that the connection is sometimes ruptured.

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The difference between church and society

Christians understand marriage as God’s design, but that is not the way the wider culture thinks of it. So how do we approach the marriage debate? It is important to recognise that the Bible sets out a significant difference between church and society.



Church

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth which was tolerating terrible behaviour, including sexual sin, he was very clear that there should be no room for that among them. Christians are people God has changed. We have been washed clean (symbolized in baptism), sanctified (set apart for God) and justified (put right and accepted by God). We have a new identity and a new life “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”. After the

list of sinful activities, Paul says “that is what some of you were” (1 Cor 6:11). Notice the past tense. They had been living sinfully, but God changed them through Christ.

Paul did not mean that Christians no longer sin at all, but that God in his grace has changed the direction of our lives and we should live consistently with that. God is at work, gathering people to worship Jesus and changing them. So, by God’s Spirit, the church is a reflection of how things should be and will be.

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How we live now matters. The Corinthian church was inclined to think that Christian living was no big deal. They probably assumed that God is interested in ‘spirits’, not bodies; so they thought what they did with their bodies was irrelevant to God. Paul is probably quoting their own saying when he says: “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food—but God will destroy them both” (1 Cor 6:13a). With this slogan, they meant that what you eat is irrelevant to being a Christian, it will all disappear in the end. They applied the same logic to sex — do what you like it doesn’t count for anything eternally. Paul’s reply is that the body is not just for food, but for the Lord (1 Cor 6:13b) and “the body is not meant for sexual immorality”. In Corinth, a city with a wild reputation, the church was called to reflect God’s kingdom with their bodies and in their behaviour. They were to stand out as people who lived differently.

If people claim to be Christians yet continue in their commitment to a sinful way of life, refusing to live as Christians, and not repenting even when they are confronted about it, then Paul says they should be called to account and be removed from the church (1 Cor 5:3–11). The church “must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is

sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler” (1 Cor 5:11). As difficult as this is, its goal is to help the person see how serious their sin is and to bring them to repent (Mt 18:15; 2Th 3:14). So, the church is to be the community which lives God’s way, no matter how the surrounding society acts. On the issue of marriage, that is the most important thing the church can do. Our major concern is not how people around us behave, but how we live as a church. As our society has moved further from God’s pattern in any area — as it has with marriage and sex — we need to be increasingly discerning about how Christians are meant to live.

We have to be countercultural in our sex life. Single Christians can show that sex is not a short cut to fun or friendship. It is too precious and powerful for that. Christians with same-sex attraction are called to resist that and build friendships and love on God’s pattern. In a society in which marriage is often dispensable, married Christians need to strive for stable, faithful, loving marriages. And when most people live as if marriage, romance and relationships are the most important thing there is, Christians should strive to put Christ first and serve him in our relationships.

Living differently in these areas will be a community calling, we need to encourage and support each other to be faithful. Christians will face sexual temptation and God makes no promise that they will be freed from those temptations in this life. He does promise to provide for us and lead us through. We need to be able to admit to each other our struggles and failings. We have to assure each other of God’s forgiveness and remind each other that we are no longer what we were. (We need to do the same thing with money and possessions, and we might find that harder).



Society

The case of people outside the church is quite different. God's pattern for marriage and sex, and every other area of life, counts for all people. Everyone is accountable to God, Paul says "God will judge those outside" (1 Cor 5:13). That is God's role, not the church's.

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Paul explains that his instruction "not to associate with sexually immoral people" was about those in the church. If the Corinthians tried to apply this to the wider world they would not be able to be part of that world at all (1 Cor 5:9-10). They are called and sent to live in the world and to know and love their neighbours. They are not to expect that society will look like the church, or try to make it like the church through 'discipline'.

This has an important implication. It's not our job to try to correct all the sins in the community. We don't have to campaign against every form of greed, or try to force people to pray or to worship the true God. God's call is for us to be a holy church in a sinful community; not to try to change the community directly. As we witness about Jesus and people join him and us, then they turn away from sin.

That doesn't mean that we don't challenge evil in society, but when we do it is a different role to what happens in the church. In the church, we can expect people to know and follow God's ways, and call them to account if they do not. In the wider society, we seek to do what we can to contribute to a just, compassionate society; but don't expect that it will be like the church. We shouldn't think that a country is 'christian' or that we can make it so with laws or policy. We work to see God change society through people coming to trust in and follow Jesus as they hear the gospel; and we do what we can to contribute to the common good of society.

One way we see this at work in the New Testament is in the instruction to pray for society (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Christian prayer is not just about our in-house concerns. We are meant to pray very widely. God is the God of the whole world, he cares for all his creation and governs and directs all nations. His people should have the same breadth of concerns. That could lead us to get involved in all sort of activities from campaigning to cultivating gardens, the first step will be to pray. The text in Jeremiah, in which the Jewish exiles are told to "seek the peace and prosperity" of the city in which they live and to pray for it, is an example of that same attitude (Jer 29:7).

So why do anything about marriage?

Where does that leave us with marriage?

There are good reasons why we should speak out and be part of the marriage debate. Yet, we need to be very clear why we do so. Our aim is not to keep, or make, Australia Christian — we aren't called to do that and we couldn't do it anyway. We are called to care for and love our neighbours. We should be involved in the marriage debate for the common good. We should aim to do what is best for our fellow citizens. That has implications for a whole range of political and public issues, including the marriage debate.

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There are three main reasons why Christians and churches should oppose marriage redefinition and they all flow from the point made above that marriage is a basic element of human life made by God to nurture and sustain society

1) Marriage and the common good

Since marriage is good for human life, when our nation is on the verge of redefining marriage, we should express our conviction. It is part of the prophetic

task of the church to bear witness to God's good order established from creation, especially when it is being abandoned. It is important to keep in mind that in the debate about marriage, we are not, primarily, concerned about homosexual relationships or any other sexual sin. The Marriage Act does not stop those relationships. We have a positive conviction about what marriage is and why it matters.¹ Society is built on marriage and family; marriage secures family life and redefining marriage will harm society because it is a further step in taking family life away from God's pattern.

In Australia, many social patterns have already moved marriage and family life away from God's pattern. Marriage redefinition is not the one change which will do this, but a step a long the way. It will, however, be a significant step.

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Extending marriage to same sex couples does not simply include them in the security given by marriage; it redefines marriage. Even though same sex couples will be a small proportion of married couples, a new legal definition will reinforce current social practices which view marriage as a relationship of two adults which is all about their preferences and feelings. That view of marriage and relationships is already bringing significant harm to society. It undermines commitment to marriage and encourages a view that sexual relationships are temporary and disposable. So redefining marriage will further cement that direction.

1 See “The two shall become one flesh: reclaiming marriage, a statement by Evangelicals and Catholics Together” *First Things* 251, (March 2015): 23-31 <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/03/the-two-shall-become-one-flesh-reclaiming-marriage-2>



Redefining marriage will also mean a step in redefinition of families. An article reviewing same sex couples in Australian law comments that “the Australian family law system remains mired in a two-parent model of legal parentage, a paradigm that does not always reflect the reality and diversity of same-sex families” and suggests that the law will need to move beyond this model.² That is, the article recommends that Australian law should get beyond a “two-parent” (mother and father) model of family life. Changing the definition of marriage will push both the law and society further in that direction. Such changes will not be for the benefit of society, as in this area, we less and less reflect God's way.

2) The protection of children.

A more specific concern is that changes in marriage and family life will impact children. A Christian understanding of marriage, family and children recognises that God's plan is that children should be raised, where possible, by their father and mother.³ This has been commonly accepted in the Western legal tradition.⁴ Reflecting this Article 9 of the UN Charter of Children's Rights states that governments should “ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will” unless it “is necessary

2 A. Sifris “Gay and lesbian parenting The legislative response”, *Families, policy and the law: Selected essays on contemporary issues for Australia* A. Hayes & D. Higgins, eds. (Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014), 98.

3 See H. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, N.D. Kloosterman, trans. (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 87-107.

4 See Neil Foster, “Can there be rational reasons for not supporting same sex marriage?” <https://lawandreligionaustralia.wordpress.com/2015/03/03/can-there-be-rational-reasons-for-not-supporting-same-sex-marriage/>

for the best interests of the child”.

The research which has been done suggests that the best possible setting for children is when they are raised in a stable married family with a husband and wife who are their biological parents. For instance, a widely quoted and generally accepted claim is that “wanted children raised by both of their biological parents in a low-conflict marriage have an easier lot in life and the best chance for healthy development”.⁵ The conclusion suggests that we should do all we can to ensure that children grow up with their mother and father wherever that is possible. This is not to ignore the problems in families of heterosexual couples or to imply that same sex couples do not love their kids and care for them. Social policy should, however, promote what is best overall, and all the evidence is that kids do best growing up with their biological parents in a committed marriage.

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There is not enough evidence to say definitively what the outcomes are for children raised in same-sex couple families, but there is at least enough negative evidence to raise significant concerns. One review concludes that current studies “do not settle the question of parents in same-sex relationships, but ... warn us that the matter is still in doubt”.⁶

Same-sex marriage will put the final social imprimatur on same-sex couples raising/adopting children as a

5 E. Terry-Humen, J. Manlove, K.A. Moore, “Births Outside of Marriage: Perceptions vs. Reality” *Childtrends* (April 2001). http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/rb_032601.pdf

6 J.B. Londregan “Same-Sex Parenting: Unpacking the Social Science” February 24th, 2015 <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/02/14465/>; see M. Regnerus, “How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study” *Social Science Research*, 41, (2012): 752–770. http://www.markregnerus.com/uploads/4/0/6/5/4065759/regnerus_july_2012_ssr.pdf

common pattern.⁷ Same-sex couples already arrange to have children by donated sperm (for female couples) or by surrogacy (for male couples). This means that there are already children who are deliberately being taken away from at least one of their genetic parents. It is better for children to grow up with their mother and father.



3) Freedom of Religion

The introduction of same sex marriage will almost certainly lead to restrictions in freedom of religion. While clergy and religious congregations will probably be protected, civil celebrants will be unlikely to have any freedom to refuse to conduct a wedding for a same-sex couple. Similarly, it is likely that business owners will be prosecuted for failing to supply services for same-sex weddings.

It is also likely that the introduction of same-sex marriage will lead to a more general pressure on the freedom of groups that hold to a traditional sexual morality, and this will ultimately have a greater impact on freedom of religion. There will be direct pressure on freedom of speech, as shown by the current action against Archbishop Porteous in Tasmania, who circulated, to parents with children enrolled in Catholic schools, a document presenting the Catholic view of marriage.

Marriage redefinition will increase the political pressure to remove or tighten the exemptions currently granted to churches and religious groups in anti-discrimination

7 For a summary of arguments against surrogacy see Scott Rae “Brave New Families?: The Ethics of the New Reproductive Technologies”, *Christian Research Journal*, (Spring, 1993), 5-8. <http://www.equip.org/PDF/DD135.pdf>

law. School curriculum and policy will be expected to conform to the assumptions of genderless marriage codified in a changed Marriage Act. This will put Christian schools, teachers and students in a difficult position. The access that churches and Christian groups currently have to universities and schools could be removed, because such groups hold views on marriage that are judged to be discriminatory and hateful. Already some Christian groups on university campuses are choosing not to address issues of sexual ethics in meetings on the campus, for fear that they will be deregistered or banned from the campus. It is likely that adoption agencies will be required to provide services for same-sex married couples equally with heterosexual couples. Courts in the UK have even held that foster parents who hold traditional sexual morality are “harmful” to potential foster children.⁸



Facing the marriage debate

Christians should speak up for God’s view of marriage. We should present God’s view and show the goodness of God’s ways, without imagining that we are in a war to rescue our culture. Lots of people in the gay and lesbian community, and the wider secular culture, see Bible believing Christians as judgemental, hateful and abusive. There may not be much we can do to change that view if people see any opposition to homosexuality as homophobia; we can do our best not to reinforce the perception. We need to put our case thoughtfully and respectfully.

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Freedom of speech and religion in Australia is good for all of society, not just religious people. If same sex marriage reduces these freedoms the whole society will suffer.

In the debate about marriage we need to show that it must be possible for people to disagree over such a sensitive topic with respect. We may need to show that we can present the classic Christian view without it being immediately ruled unacceptable, that in itself will help to maintain a genuine religious freedom.

⁸ See R. T. Anderson, *Truth overruled : the future of marriage and religious freedom*. (Washington: Regnery, 2015), 85-104 for a summary of some of the US experience before and after the *Obergefell* decision.



What can I say to my friends?

If the plebiscite happens, then there will be plenty of discussion about marriage. Some people will have very strong opinions, others will be interested to talk about the issue. You need to think about the best way to respond to each person. Here are a few suggestions of comments and answers. They are not meant to be scripts to repeat, but suggestions which might spark your thinking about your own responses.

In answering, don't hide your Christian convictions. Say that your view is based on what Jesus said about marriage. He taught that God made marriage and that marriage is for a man and woman for life. This will not, by itself, convince a non-Christian friend. But it can help to start a discussion which might clarify the fact that our views about marriage come from our basic moral and worldview commitments.



Here are some other approaches which may help to present the case for retaining marriage:

- Marriage has been the building block of family and society in every culture, it's too important to play around with. It is like the environment, it has nurtured human life for millennia and if we change it the consequences can be enormous. Same sex marriage might seem like a small shift, but it changes the nature of marriage itself. It makes marriage all about individual desires and presences, not about how we are made. Once the changes catch up with us, it will be too late to turn it back.

- Gender neutral marriage means we don't have mums and dads — just parents. Mums and Dads each make a unique contribution to how we grow up, and the classic view of marriage is based on that.
- We should aim for kids to grow up with their own Mum and Dad wherever possible.
- The newest thing is not always the best thing. The wisdom of ancient cultures is that marriage is between man and woman. Isn't it better to stick with that wisdom than go with the new fads of Western elites.
- Redefining marriage means our culture is ignoring the differences between men and women; that means there will be more sex education teaching kids about homosexuality and gender fluidity.
- Retaining the classic view of marriage recognises the special significance of male-female relationships, it doesn't rob same sex couples of any benefits. Same sex couples already have all the benefits and protections under Australian law.
- Redefining marriage removes the reason that it is special. It matters because a man and a woman can form the basis of a family and can have children.



Answering some of the hard questions

Discussions about marriage often come with some pointed questions which aren't easy to answer off the cuff. Here are some possible, short, responses to some of the common questions. Each of these questions deserves a far longer response if the person is interested, these answers are simply a suggestion of how you might start.

What right do Christians have to impose their views on society?

We're in the middle of a debate, so putting your view is what you are meant to do. Arguing for a view is not the same as imposing it. Everyone thinks about marriage from their worldview and their basic convictions, and marriage is a basic question for our society. Surely we expect everyone to engage with the issues and have their say. Plenty of people, religious and non-religious, want to keep marriage as it is.

Why shouldn't everyone have the right to marry who they love?

In our society people are free to love whoever they want, but marriage is not just about love. It matters because it is about the building block of society, respected in just about every culture as the relationship between a man and woman. The best thing for kids is to be parented by their father and mother. We should try to encourage this.

Changing the definition of marriage won't hurt your marriage at all. Why are you so upset about it?

I'm not concerned about the impact on me, it is the impact on kids and society that concern me. Marriage has been the basic building block for society for millennia, I'm not sure we've even got the right or power to change what it is. If we try, it won't be an improvement.

Homosexuality is not a choice, its how people are born. How can you say it is wrong?

The marriage debate isn't about sexual orientation, but whether it is the basis for marriage. In fact, there is no clear evidence that you are born gay, sexual development is too more complex to be put down to one factor. Part of being mature person is choosing how you act, and it doesn't treat people with dignity to assume that their behaviour is predetermined. If we expect people to take responsibility for their actions, then that assumes there is some basis for working out right and wrong, it is n't something we just make up. Christians recognise that God decides the pattern for how we should live, and he has a pattern for sex and marriage.

Aren't Christians homophobic?

You can disagree with someone and think what they are doing is wrong without hating them. That is an important basis for a free society.

I don't think that someone's identity is in their sexuality or gender (or race). Everyone is made by God with value and dignity. That means that disagreement about issues and lifestyles is not the same as rejecting them as a person or hating them. In fact, being ready to talk about where we disagree is part of treating people with dignity. Our society (including Christians) have not always done that well, but that is not a reason to stop talking about moral issues. That would be just as bad.

One of things that really impresses me about Jesus is that he could treat people — really religious people and prostitutes and all sorts in between — with dignity and love and still tell them they were doing things wrong and needed God's forgiveness. I found that in my own experience of him, he makes me aware of things I do wrong and promises his forgiveness. I want to try to reflect that same attitude.

Resources

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