

Don't Mess with Marriage

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We all know and love someone with same-sex attraction. We want them to be happy. So we all feel the tug of the view that everything that makes heterosexuals happy should be open to same-sex attracted people – including marriage.

Some say marriage should now be redefined as a public commitment by people to love each other – and so any two people should be allowed to marry. Anything else would be unfair, discriminatory, 'unequal'.

But hold on: what if marriage is essentially heterosexual? No one thinks it's wrong to restrict primary schools to children, women's hospitals to women, Aboriginal land rights to indigenous Australians... some things are precisely for them and exist because of them. The question is: is marriage precisely for "man and wife" and if so, why?

When a churchman like me asks such a question it's readily assumed to come from faith-fuelled bigotry. To the extent churchmen, or other Christians, have been guilty of bigotry I am ashamed and sorry. At many times in history, and sadly still today in some places, people with same-sex attraction have suffered injustice or unlove from some believers. This is to be deplored.

But the idea that marriage must be between man and woman is not bigotry. It is not even particularly Christian: every major world religion has thought so. Nor is the idea peculiarly religious: every major civilisation till now has thought so. Even in highly diverse and sexually opportune cultures like ancient Greece marriage was reserved to a man and a woman.

So why not morph marriage into a new institution for anyone who wants publicly to commit to loving each other?

For starters, marriage doesn't just harmonise two people's emotional lives. Marriage has always been valued for holding together things which otherwise tend to pull apart: sex and love, love and babies, men and women, babies and parents. Not every marriage successfully unites all these things, but only the union of a man and woman can possibly do so.

Not every marriage ends up having kids, but every kid has a mum and dad. Marriage exists to bring a man and woman together so that, in the normal course of things, they become father and mother to any kids their

love creates, and then to hold that man and woman together so those kids have parents for the long haul.

Reducing marriage to whatever gives adults emotional satisfaction leaves us with no real reason why such a union should be "for life" (as feelings aren't), why it should be between only two people (three or more might love each other too), or why government should regulate it at all (we don't need a registrar to tell us who to love or for how long).

To claim that there are differences between men and women, mothers and fathers, parents and children, and to support an institution built around those distinctions, need not be unjustly discriminatory. What *is* unjust is to pretend these differences are irrelevant to the lives of all those already married, those who might in future want real marriage, or those whose families are founded on this relationship.

Many people today find it hard to commit to marriage and stay married. There are lots of reasons for that. But adding to the confusion about what marriage is and is for, and further deconstructing this institution, will only weaken it further.

We could do more to ensure the same-sex attracted are treated with respect and love. But in doing so we don't have to undermine marriage further. Don't mess with marriage.

Archbishop Fisher is also Chair of the Bishops Commission for Family, Youth and Life.

May 2015