



# Who defines marriage?

by James Heinbuch

**T**HE WORD IS OUT. Prime Minister Chrétien promises that sometime this fall the House of Commons will hold a free vote on a new definition of marriage which will include same-sex couples. The debate on who has the right to be married rages among Members of Parliament as well as in churches, restaurants, newspapers and homes.

Is marriage a union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others as it was formerly defined or can two members of the same sex be married? To some, like the judges who made recent court rulings in Ontario and B.C., it is a matter on which the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has final authority. They say the old definition of marriage discriminates. It must include marriage between members of the same sex. On the other side of the debate are those, including Lutheran Church-Canada, who define marriage from a historic and religious basis as an exclusive union of one man and one woman.

## What the Charter says

Section seven of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms says "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice." The fifteenth section states there shall be no "discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability." Those favouring same-sex marriages lay claim to these sections of the Charter saying that the traditional definition of marriage discriminates against those whose sexual orientation is toward members of the same sex.

Canadian society embraces pluralism and highly values the equality of persons under the law. Equality is then understood by many to say that everyone should be treated the same. One must agree that prejudice is an evil that must be opposed. Many courts have expanded the specific provisions of the Charter to include discrimination based on sexual orientation. The argument becomes: If I wish to fulfil my life through a marriage with a person of the same sex, any opposition to me is discriminatory and wrong. It must be noted that the basis of this argument is personal and secular with no reference to history, religion, or God's truth.

However, Canadian society has many discriminatory laws of which the majority of people approve. Persons under a certain age may not marry regardless of their sexual orientation. (Is this age discrimination?) It is a breach of the law when a person wants to take several spouses. Even our cherished "freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication" (Charter section 2) is limited by our "hate laws" which say one cannot promote hatred of a specific group. Within these rights, freedoms, and responsibilities government has the obligation to regulate its citizens so that everyone has "the right to life, liberty, and security of the person" (Charter section 7).

If marriage were only a secular relationship between two people then the government could do whatever it wanted. Everyone knows that marriage is more than just between two people. Others are involved. The fact this debate is so heated proves that others have vested interests in marriage. There are historical, biological, and

Biblical considerations when one tries to understand and define marriage.

### Looking at the facts

Gay and lesbian activity is not a recent development. History records homosexual activity among the ancient Greeks and Romans. These same Greeks and Romans had laws which protected marriage and they did not include same-sex couples. Only children from legally married couples were considered legitimate and had the right to receive inheritance. Since homosexual unions are not capable of procreating, they could not be considered marriages.

Biologically, it is possible to have children outside of marriage. Today it is even possible for homosexual couples to have their own children through *in vitro* fertilization, surrogate parenting and, potentially, cloning. However, there is more to the argument than just possibilities. Studies show that children develop best in a family in which the child's biological mother and father are married. There are exceptions to this rule, but studies bear out the facts. We as a society want the best for our children.

The world's major religions realize that marriage also has a spiritual element. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others have joined together in statements protesting the proposed redefinition of marriage. Most are not fundamentalists, but they do speak from the convictions of their own faith.

### The biblical basis

Christianity goes to the Bible for its understanding of what God wants for us. He created a perfect world and placed a perfect man and woman in the Garden of Eden. He knows what is best for humans and what falls short of perfection. He created Adam and Eve to help each other (Gen. 2:18) and to fill the earth with their descendants (Gen. 1:28). God explains the significance of what happened to them saying, "For this cause a man will leave his father and his mother, and will cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24 NAB). This is an exclusive union between Adam and Eve. As one reads the Bible, marriages are always the relationship between man and woman. Any time homosexual relations are mentioned they are absolutely condemned.

When Jesus spoke of marriage, He always assumed the relationship was between a man and a woman. He quotes Genesis 2:24 with approval (Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7) that a man should be joined to his wife. Jesus went to the wedding at Cana (John 2), was willing to

talk to the woman at the well (John 4), and He used the groom's coming to meet his bride as an example of the end when He would return to judge (Matt. 25). These are all examples of marriage between one man and one woman.

### Love and the Law

Some say Jesus didn't judge and He commands us to use the Golden Rule. This is most certainly true. But Jesus' point of condemning those who did not keep the Law is never mentioned. He spoke to the woman at the well (John 4), but He did not approve of her current relationship. In the Sermon on the Mount He intensified the Law from the rabbis' interpretation. Lust is not just an action but also a thought that can send someone to damnation (Matt. 5:27-32). Jesus ate

with sinners, but He was there to call them to repentance and life. When Jesus told His followers not to judge it was because they were not to judge by rules they had made up. His followers were to let the Word of God judge as they shared their concerns with others (Matt. 18:15-20).

The rest of the New Testament also speaks of the unique relationship in the marriage of one man and one woman. Any union between people outside of marriage is recognized as a distortion (sin) of what God intended (1 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 13:4). Paul, in Ephesians 5:32, says that the union of one man and one woman in loving marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and His bride—the Church. John uses the imagery of Jesus, the Bridegroom, coming to receive His bride, the Church who then enter the marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9).

### The difficult division

So how does a Christian who believes that the Bible is the Word of God respond when the government is planning to redefine the institution of marriage? As people of God we live with our feet firmly planted in two realms. We are members of the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ, but at the same time we live in the world which does not always base its actions on what God wants. When a Roman Catholic Bishop said that Prime Minister Chrétien risks his eternal salvation if he continues moving toward redefining marriage, the prime minister responded saying that he believes in the separation of Church and State.

Jesus told us in the Gospel (Matt. 22:21) to give to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's. In 1999 when Parliament supported the traditional definition of marriage, Christians were

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## Luther on marriage

LUTHER CLAIMS that God gave him the insight into justification by faith instantaneously while reading Romans 1 (*Luther's Works* 34:337). This is certainly not the case for his views on marriage.

In the beginning of his ministry Luther was a son of the Church of Rome. He viewed marriage as something which was thoroughly regulated by the Church and its courts. As late as 1519 he still viewed marriage as a sacrament in his "Sermon on the Estate of Marriage" (*LW* 44:10). But the next year in one of his great writings, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he clearly states that marriage is not to be counted as one of the sacraments (*LW* 36:92-96) because it is instituted by God for the heathen as well as believers.

For the rest of his life Luther was torn in two ways. On one side, he believed marriage is ordained by God for the benefit of the whole society. He says in his 1522 *Estate of Marriage* that one can "learn how honourable a thing it is to live in that estate which God has ordained" (*LW* 45:19). In the *Large Catechism* (1529) on the Sixth Commandment Luther explains the blessings of marriage. "He [God] established it before all others as the first of all institutions, and He created man and woman differently... Married life is no matter for jest or idle curiosity, but it is a glorious institution and an object of God's serious concern" (Kolb/Wengert, p. 414). Marriage is serious spiritual business.

On the other hand, because marriage is a social institution, Luther felt that most of the regulation of marriage belongs in the hands of the secular leaders (*LW* 53:111; and 21:93). One must remember that Luther was speaking to a society where Christian leaders took their faith seriously and led those in their political care accordingly.

happy to use its definition. But when the secular definition of marriage was in conflict with God's definition, the Church went its own way. In the early Church it was illegal for a free person to marry a slave. The Church worked to change this attitude. As the Government of Canada attempts to change the definition of marriage Christians have the duty as citizens to work toward the best definition of marriage. (See [www.lutheranchurch.ca/marriage](http://www.lutheranchurch.ca/marriage))

Paul very clearly told the recipients of his letters that the government was established by God (Rom. 13) and that it is our duty to pray for those in leadership (1 Tim. 2) so that we may lead quiet and peaceful lives. Peter responded to the leaders in Jerusalem that it was more important to obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19). Today, Christians look to the Word of God for guidance rather than the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. As Christians we thank God that the Charter also provides for our right

of religious association, but we also know that we have a higher allegiance than to our government. We live under the Word of God rather than under human ideas of rights and freedoms.

Who defines marriage? For Christians the answer is clear. In faith we look to the Word of God. It is summarized beautifully in the words of the Catechism and the explanations: "How do we lead a sexually pure and decent life? We lead a sexually pure and decent life when we (a) consider sexuality to be a good gift of God; (b) honour marriage as God's institution, the lifelong union of one man and one woman; (c) reserve sexual intercourse for the marriage partner alone; (d) control sexual urges in a God-pleasing way." God wants to draw all of us away from our selfish sinfulness into a life with Him that is full in every way. We thank God for the wonderful gift of marriage.

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