

The Divine Institution of Marriage

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Introduction

In 1995, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” which declares the following truths about marriage:

We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central

to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children. . . .

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity.^[1]

Since the publication of that statement, there have been many challenges to the institution of marriage. Prominent among these challenges has been the recognition by several national governments and some states and provinces that same-sex marriage—formal unions between two individuals of the same gender—are the equivalent of traditional marriage. Yet God’s purposes for establishing marriage have not changed. One purpose of this document is to reaffirm the Church’s declaration that marriage is the lawful union of a man and a woman.

Another purpose is to reaffirm that the Church has a single, undeviating standard of sexual morality: intimate relations are acceptable to God only between a husband and a wife who are united in the bonds of matrimony.

A third purpose is to set forth the Church’s reasons for defending marriage between a man and a woman as an issue of moral imperative. The Church’s opposition to same-sex marriage derives from its doctrine and teachings, as well as from its concern about the consequences of same-sex marriage on religious freedom, society, families, and children.

A fourth purpose of this document is to reaffirm that Church members should address the issue of same-sex marriage with respect and civility and should treat all people with love and humanity.

The Vital Importance of Marriage

Marriage is sacred and was ordained of God from before the foundation of the world. Jesus Christ affirmed the divine origins of marriage: “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?”^[2]

From the beginning, the sacred nature of marriage was closely linked to the power of procreation. After creating Adam and Eve, God commanded them to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,”^[3] and they brought forth children, forming the first family. Only a man and a woman together have the natural biological capacity to conceive children. This power of procreation—to create life and bring

God's spirit children into the world—is divinely given. Misuse of this power undermines the institution of the family.^[4]

For millennia, strong families have served as the fundamental institution for transmitting to future generations the moral strengths, traditions, and values that sustain civilization. In 1948, the world's nations issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirming that “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society.”^[5]

Marriage is far more than a contract between individuals to ratify their affections and provide for mutual obligations. Rather, marriage is a vital institution for rearing children and teaching them to become responsible adults. Throughout the ages, governments of all types have recognized marriage as essential in preserving social stability and perpetuating life. Regardless of whether marriages were performed as a religious rite or a civil ceremony, in almost every culture marriage has been protected and endorsed by governments primarily to preserve and foster the institution most central to rearing children and teaching them the moral values that undergird civilization.

It is true that some couples who marry will not have children, either by choice or because of infertility. The special status granted marriage is nevertheless closely linked to the inherent powers and responsibilities of procreation and to the innate differences between the genders. By contrast, same-sex marriage is an institution no longer linked to gender—to the biological realities and complementary natures of male and female. Its effect is to decouple marriage from its central role in creating life, nurturing time-honored values, and fostering family bonds across generations.

In recent decades, high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births have resulted in an exceptionally large number of single parents. Many of these single parents have raised exemplary children. Extensive studies have shown, however, that a husband and wife who are united in a loving, committed marriage generally provide the ideal environment for protecting, nurturing, and raising children.^[6] This is in part because of the differing qualities and strengths that husbands and wives bring to the task by virtue of their gender. As an eminent academic on family life has written:

The burden of social science evidence supports the idea that gender differentiated parenting is important for human development and that the contribution of fathers to child rearing is unique and irreplaceable. . . . The complementarity of male and female parenting styles is striking and of enormous importance to a child's overall development.^[7]

In view of the close links that have long existed between marriage, procreation, gender, and parenting, same-sex marriage cannot be regarded simply as the granting of a new “right.” It is a far-reaching redefinition of the very nature of marriage itself. It marks a fundamental change in the institution of marriage in ways that are contrary to God's purposes for His children and detrimental to the long-term interests of society.

Threats to Marriage and Family

Our modern era has seen traditional marriage and family—defined as a husband and wife with children in an intact marriage—come increasingly under assault, with deleterious consequences. In 2012, 40% of all births in the United States were to unwed mothers.^[8] More than 50% of births to mothers under age 30 were out of wedlock. Further, the marriage rate has been declining since the 1980s. These trends do not bode well for the development of the rising generation.

A wide range of social ills has contributed to this weakening of marriage and family. These include divorce, cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, pornography, the erosion of fidelity in marriage, abortion, the strains of unemployment and poverty, and many other social phenomena. The Church has a long history of speaking out on these issues and seeking to minister to our members with regard to them. The focus of this document on same-sex marriage is not intended to minimize these long-standing issues.

The movement to promote same-sex marriage as an inherent or constitutional right has gained notable ground in recent years. Court rulings, legislative actions, and referenda have legalized same-sex marriage in a number of nations, states, and jurisdictions. In response, societal and religious leaders of many persuasions and faiths have made the case that redefining marriage in this way will further weaken the institution over time, resulting in negative consequences for both adults and children.^[9]

A large number of people around the world recognize the crucial role that traditional marriage has played and must continue to play if children and families are to be protected and moral values propagated. Because the issue of same-sex marriage strikes at the very heart of the family and has the potential for great impact upon the welfare of children, the Church unequivocally affirms that marriage should remain the lawful union of a man and a woman.

Unchanging Standards of Morality

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that God has established clear standards of morality for His children, who are accountable before Him for their behavior. Such standards cannot be changed by the reasoning, emotions, personal interests, or opinions of mortal beings.^[10] Without the higher authority of God, as revealed in scripture and by His prophets, secular society will flounder and drift.

Many advocates of same-sex marriage argue that traditional standards of sexual morality have changed and that “tolerance” requires that these new standards be recognized and codified in law. If tolerance is defined as showing kindness for others and respect for differing viewpoints, it is an important value in all democratic societies. But as Elder Dallin H. Oaks has observed, “Tolerance does not require abandoning one’s standards or one’s opinions on political or public policy choices. Tolerance is a way of reacting to diversity, not a command to insulate it from examination.”^[11]

The Savior taught that we should love the sinner without condoning the sin. In the case of the woman taken in adultery, He treated her kindly but exhorted her to “sin no more.”^[12] His example manifested the highest love possible.

In addition to using the argument of tolerance to advocate redefining marriage, proponents have advanced the argument of “equality before the law.” No mortal law, however, can override or nullify the moral standards established by God. Nor can the laws of men change the natural, innate differences between the genders or deny the close biological and social link between procreation and marriage.

How Would Same-Sex Marriage Affect Religious Freedom?

As governments have legalized same-sex marriage as a civil right, they have also enforced a wide variety of other policies to ensure there is no discrimination against same-sex couples. These policies have placed serious burdens on individual conscience and on religious organizations.^[13]

Same-sex marriage and anti-discrimination laws have already spawned legal collisions with the rights of free speech and of action based on religious beliefs. For example, advocates and government officials in certain states have challenged the long-held right of religious adoption agencies to follow their religious beliefs and place children only in homes with both a mother and a father. As a result, Catholic Charities in several states was forced to give up its adoption services rather than be forced to place children with same-sex couples.^[14]

In the United States, the First Amendment right of free exercise of religion is coming under pressure from proponents of same-sex marriage. Some of these proponents advocate that tax exemptions and benefits should be withdrawn from any religious organization that does not accept such marriages.^[15] The First Amendment may protect clergy from being forced to perform same-sex marriages, but other people of faith have faced and likely will continue to face legal pressures and sanctions. The same will happen with religiously affiliated institutions and educational systems. For example, a Georgia counselor contracted by the Centers for Disease Control was fired after an investigation into her decision to refer someone in a same-sex relationship to another counselor. In New Jersey, a ministry lost its tax-exempt status for denying a lesbian couple the use of its pavilion for their wedding. New Mexico's Human Rights Commission prosecuted a commercial photographer for refusing to photograph a same-sex commitment ceremony. When public schools in Massachusetts began teaching students about same-sex civil marriage, a Court of Appeals ruled that parents had no right to exempt their students.^[16]

Similar limitations on religious freedom have already become the social and legal reality in several European nations, and the European Parliament has recommended that laws protecting the status of same-sex couples be made uniform across the European Union.^[17] Where same-sex marriage becomes a recognized civil right, it inevitably conflicts with the rights of believers, and religious freedom is diminished.

How Would Same-Sex Marriage Affect Society?

The possible diminishing of religious freedom is not the only societal implication of legalizing same-sex marriage. Perhaps the most common argument that proponents of same-sex marriage make is that it is essentially harmless and will not affect the institution of traditional heterosexual marriage in any way. "It won't affect your marriage, so why should you care?" is the common refrain. While it may be true that allowing same-sex marriage will not immediately and directly affect existing marriages, the real question is how it will affect society as a whole over time, including the rising generation and future generations.

In addition to undermining and diluting the sacred nature of marriage, legalizing same-sex marriage brings many practical implications in the sphere of public policy that will be of concern to parents and society.^[18] When a government legalizes same-sex marriage as a civil right, it will almost certainly include a wide variety of other policies to enforce this. The implications of these policies are critical to understanding the seriousness of condoning same-sex marriage.

The all-important question of public policy must be: what environment is best for the child and for the rising generation? While some same-sex couples will obtain guardianship over children, traditional marriage provides the most solid and well-established social identity for children.^[19] It increases the likelihood that they will be able to form a clear gender identity, with sexuality closely linked to both love and procreation. By contrast, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage may, over time, erode the

social identity, gender development, and moral character of children. No dialogue on this issue can be complete without taking into account the long-term consequences for children.

As one example of how children will be adversely affected, the establishment of same-sex marriage as a civil right will inevitably entail changes in school curricula. When the state says that same-sex marriages are equivalent to heterosexual marriages, public school administrators will feel obligated to support this claim.^[20] This has already happened in many jurisdictions, where from elementary school through high school, children are taught that marriage can be defined as a legal union between two adults of any gender, that the definition of family is fluid, and in some cases that consensual sexual relations are morally neutral.^[21] In addition, in many areas, schools are not required to notify parents of this curriculum or to give families the opportunity to opt out.^[22] These developments are already causing clashes between the agenda of secular school systems and the right of parents to teach their children deeply held standards of morality.

Throughout history, the family has served as an essential bulwark of individual liberty. The walls of a home provide a defense against detrimental social influences and the sometimes overreaching powers of government. In the absence of abuse or neglect, government does not have the right to intervene in the rearing and moral education of children in the home. Strong, independent families are vital for political and religious freedom.

Civility and Kindness

The Church acknowledges that same-sex marriage and the issues surrounding it can be divisive and hurtful. As Church members strive to protect marriage between a man and a woman, they should show respect, civility, and kindness toward others who have different points of view.

The Church has advocated for legal protection for same-sex couples regarding “hospitalization and medical care, fair housing and employment rights, or probate rights, so long as these do not infringe on the integrity of the traditional family or the constitutional rights of churches.”^[23] In Salt Lake City, for example, the Church supported ordinances to protect gay residents from discrimination in housing and employment.^[24]

The Church’s affirmation of marriage as being between a man and a woman “neither constitutes nor condones any kind of hostility toward gays and lesbians.”^[25] Church members are to treat all people with love and humanity. They may express genuine love and kindness toward a gay or lesbian family member, friend, or other person without condoning any redefinition of marriage.

Conclusion

Strong, stable families, headed by a father and mother, are the anchor of society. When marriage is undermined by gender confusion and by distortions of its God-given meaning, the rising generation of children and youth will find it increasingly difficult to develop their natural identities as men or women. Some will find it more difficult to engage in wholesome courtships, form stable marriages, and raise another generation imbued with moral strength and purpose.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, along with many other churches, organizations, and individuals, will continue to defend the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, because it is a compelling moral issue of profound importance to our religion and to the future of society.

The final words in the Church's proclamation on the family are an admonition to the world from the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: "We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society."^[26]

References

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- [3] Genesis 1:28.
- [4] See M. Russell Ballard, "What Matters Most Is What Lasts Longest," *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 41–44.
- [5] United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III), Dec. 10, 1948.
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- [11] Dallin H. Oaks, "Weightier Matters," *Ensign*, Jan. 2001, 17.
- [12] John 8:11.
- [13] See Douglas Laycock, Anthony R. Picarello Jr., and Robin F. Wilson, eds., *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty, Emerging Conflicts* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).
- [14] See usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/fortnight-for-freedom/upload/Catholic-Adoption-Services.pdf
- [15] See Jonathan Turley, "An Unholy Union: Same-Sex Marriage and the Use of Governmental Programs to Penalize Religious Groups with Unpopular Practices," in Laycock, Picarello, and Wilson, eds., *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts*, 59–76.
- [16] Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York and London: Encounter Books, 2012), 62–64.

[17] See Roger Trigg, *Equality, Freedom, and Religion* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, Report 2012 (Vienna, Austria, 2013); “European Parliament Resolution on Homophobia in Europe,” adopted Jan. 18, 2006.

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[19] See endnote 6.

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[24] See mormonnewsroom.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/statement-given-to-salt-lake-city-council-on-nondiscrimination-ordinances.

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[26] “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 102.