

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

KA8

RESISTING THE DESECRATION OF MARRIAGE

DESECRATE: To divert from a sacred purpose (*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*)

In spite of a welcome surge in 2010 in the number of marriages taking place in the UK, the institution of marriage in this country is facing its most pernicious threat for centuries.

On 15 March – the Ides of March – the British government, through the Government Equalities Office, launched a public consultation which has as its theme the redefinition of marriage, in England and Wales, to include same-sex couples. The Consultation will last for 12 weeks, closing on 14 June 2012.

Thankfully, the Consultation includes a question (Question 1), asking directly whether respondents agree or disagree with enabling all couples, regardless of their gender, to have a civil marriage ceremony. Earlier indications had been that the Consultation would assume the redefinition of marriage without further debate, and would only be asking how the proposed changes should be implemented.

However, the inclusion of this question, while welcome, is scant consolation. Several other features of the Consultation are hugely controversial:

- The Consultation is unequivocal about its intention, even though it invites a range of views, and has included Question 1: 'This Consultation is about how we best remove the ban on same-sex couples having a civil marriage, not on whether this should or should not happen.' (*Paragraph 2:8*)
- The Consultation Document declares in advance that the government will not be influenced by the number of responses received. The Document indicates: 'The government's response will take all responses submitted into account, and will be based on a careful consideration of the points made in consultation responses, not the number of responses received' (*Introduction, Page 2*). This statement can be read as meaning that responses will be taken into account to the extent that they conform to the preconceived

ideas, and are helpful to the intended outcomes. To imply in advance that the government is prepared to ignore a majority view (if the majority of responses do turn out to be opposed to any change in the definition of marriage) reflects an undemocratic spirit, to say the least.

- The Consultation claims only to be addressing the issue of ‘civil marriage,’ and asserts that no change at all is proposed or under consideration in respect of ‘religious marriage.’ This is a completely false distinction, since under English law there is, and has only ever been, one definition of marriage. The only distinction which exists relates to marriage *ceremonies*. The law governing religious and civil ceremonies is distinct, but once the ceremony is over, there is only one definition and legal status of marriage. In spite of the obvious fact, in the real world, that there is only one marriage, the Consultation Document appears to want to create a different impression. It makes 25 references to ‘civil marriage’ and nine references to ‘religious marriage.’ These references all refer to marriage itself, rather than marriage ceremonies. There are many other references to ‘civil marriage ceremonies’ and ‘religious marriage ceremonies’ which are perfectly correct. In the Consultation Document, the government appears to be setting a course towards the creation of two types of marriage, each defined differently – religious marriage, as currently defined, and civil marriage, redefined to include same-sex couples. By giving the impression that these two types of marriage *already exist*, the government seems to be making it look as though the proposed change is less significant than it is. If two types of marriage already exist, the government might be implying, this Consultation is much less of a deal – it is only about an adjustment to one of them. The reality is that if the proposed change is implemented, the meaning of marriage itself, and all existing and new individual marriages, will be changed fundamentally, with profound social consequences.

- It is obvious from the Consultation Document that the driving force behind the proposed changes is the relentless ‘equality’ agenda which is currently dominating and trumping every other value in public policy throughout the Western world. The Consultation is entitled *Equal Civil Marriage: A Consultation*. Six times in the Consultation Document the new status to be created is described as ‘equal civil marriage,’ when, in the context, it could just as well be described as ‘civil marriage’ – the word ‘equal’ is gratuitous window-dressing. It clearly cheapens marriage when it is so obvious at a glance that the main concern of the proposals is not the nature and meaning of marriage, nor its benefit to the strength and stability of society and the happiness of individuals. The pre-eminent issue, and perhaps even the only issue, is that the proposals tick the equality box. In the current climate, what is good for the nation is no longer the test of a matter. The totemic and trophy considerations are deemed to be more important.

For the good of the nation, Christians associated with Affinity, and everyone identifying with the Coalition for Marriage, will want to oppose any change to the definition of marriage, even though the marriage in view in the Consultation Document is described as ‘civil marriage.’

It is hard to imagine any area of public policy, or any subject of proposed legislation, which could be more fundamental or more vital to any society than the definition of marriage. The huge inherent significance of any change is compounded by the length of time – many centuries in this instance – during which the definition of this pillar of the country’s social fabric has remained unchanged and unchallenged. Long years ago it became established as an assumed and accepted part of the traditional culture and pattern of society. Through many centuries it has survived the tragedies of wars and diseases, the extremes of national and personal affluence and austerity, the breakdown of class structures, and the advances and declines of fervent religion.

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The battle to save marriage as we know it will be intense and high-profile. The wolf is certainly at the door, poised to tear the heart out of the current meaning of marriage. A number of those who have already expressed concern publicly about the consequences of the proposals have been accused of ‘scaremongering.’

A campaign group called Coalition for Marriage (C4M) was launched on 20 February to defend the existing definition of marriage. Although started by Christian organisations, it represents a wide range of religious and non-religious perspectives, all convinced that the definition of marriage should not be changed. A diversity of groups and individuals have been able to unite wholeheartedly, on the basis of the following statement:

I support the legal definition of marriage which is the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. I oppose any attempt to redefine it.

Opponents of the C4M campaign have already sought to label the debate as a contest between a secular and a Christian view of marriage. They have tried to brand those who argue against change as people campaigning to protect religious assumptions and freedoms. Nothing could be further from the case. C4M is defending the value, integrity and social implications of marriage on behalf of everyone, and there isn’t a hint of ‘defending our corner’ about it. The campaign is unashamedly acting on behalf of the whole human race.

Here are three cogent reasons – none of them ‘religious’ – why the definition of marriage should not be changed in the way suggested:

[1] To extend ‘marriage’ to same-sex couples would not only change the definition of marriage, but would significantly reduce its status. No longer would the word ‘marriage’ be describing a particular and unique institution and relationship – its status would be reduced to that of a formal administrative category of State recognition. As an umbrella group of relationships, rather than a distinct institution, the word ‘marriage’ would describe less than it now does.

[2] If marriage is watered down in this way, this will undermine the value of marriage, and fewer people will marry. This will have extensive social consequences.

[3] For the same reason, people who are already married are likely to be disheartened about the down-grading of the status and meaning of marriage, and the regard they have for their own marriages risks being weakened. If marriage is perceived to be less important and less well-regarded, this will inevitably make more people more willing to consider ending their own marriages.

Marriage is a pillar of the social fabric of any society. Any weakening of the impact of and respect for marriage would seriously de-stabilise that society. There would be economic consequences both at a personal and national level, and there would be an increase in lawlessness, especially among the younger generations.

After six years of steady decline, the number of marriages taking place in the UK suddenly rose significantly in 2010 – the most recent year for which figures are available. It seems strangely capricious that this healthy and encouraging upward trend should now be put at risk by calling the fundamental definition of marriage into question.

The figures for 2010, published by the Office for National Statistics, show that throughout the UK there were 277,740 marriages, a four per cent increase on the previous year. In nearly two-thirds of the marriages, neither party had been married before.

However, one great change over the years has been the age at which people marry. Men are now marrying at an average age of 36.2 and women at 33.6, whereas 40 years ago, couples marrying were almost 10 years younger.

The reduction in the number of marriages since 1970 is generally attributed to a tendency for people to delay marrying, for various reasons, including financial circumstances, and to the increasing number of people choosing to cohabit, some of whom marry later.

In spite of the deficiencies of the present Consultation, it is vital that thousands of churches, Christian organisations and individual Christians should respond to the Consultation. However categorical its assertions at this stage, an overwhelming response can compel the government to have a change of mind. The Coalition for Marriage will be providing information to assist everyone wishing to submit a response.

Rod Badams

The following are the questions which are being asked in the Consultation:

Question 1: Do you agree or disagree with enabling all couples, regardless of their gender to have a civil marriage ceremony?

Question 2: Please explain the reasons for your answer. Please respond within 150 words.

Question 3: If you identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual would you wish to have a civil marriage ceremony?

Question 4: If you represent a group of individuals who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual would those you represent wish to have a civil marriage ceremony?

Question 5: The Government does not propose to open up religious marriage to same-sex couples. Do you agree or disagree?

Question 6: Do you agree or disagree with keeping the option of civil partnerships once civil marriage is available to same-sex couples?

Question 7: If you identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual and were considering making a legal commitment to your partner would you prefer to have a civil partnership or a civil marriage?

Question 8: The Government is not considering opening up civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. Do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

Question 9: If you are in a civil partnership would you wish to take advantage of this policy and convert your civil partnership into a marriage?

Question 10: Do you agree or disagree that there should be a time limit on the ability to convert a civil partnership into a marriage?

Question 11: Do you agree or disagree that there should be the choice to have a civil ceremony on conversion of a civil partnership into a marriage?

Question 12: If you are a married transsexual person would you want to take advantage of this policy and remain in your marriage while obtaining a full Gender Recognition Certificate?

Question 13: If you are the spouse of a transsexual person, would you want to take advantage of this policy and remain in your marriage whilst your spouse obtained a full Gender Recognition Certificate?

Question 14: Do you have any comments on the assumptions or issues outlined in this chapter on consequential impacts? Please respond within 1,225 characters (approx 200 words).

Question 15: Are you aware of any costs or benefits? that exist to either the public or private sector, or individuals that we have not accounted for? Please respond within 1,225 characters (approx 200 words).

Question 16: Do you have any other comments on the proposals within this consultation? Please respond within 1,225 characters (approx 200 words).

Responses to the Consultation can be submitted by completing the online **[response form available at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equal-civil-marriage](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equal-civil-marriage)** Alternatively, responses can be emailed to: **equalcivilmarriage@geo.gsi.gov.uk** or **posted as hard copy to:** Government Equalities Office, 3rd Floor Fry, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF

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