



What Is Marriage?: Man and Woman: A Defense

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Until yesterday, no society had seen marriage as anything other than a conjugal partnership: a male-female union. *What Is Marriage?* identifies and defends the reasons for this historic consensus and shows why redefining civil marriage is unnecessary, unreasonable, and contrary to the common good.

Originally published in the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, this book's core argument quickly became the year's most widely read essay on the most prominent scholarly network in the social sciences. Since then, it has been cited and debated by scholars and activists throughout the world as the most formidable defense of the tradition ever written. Now revamped, expanded, and vastly improved, *What Is Marriage?* stands poised to meet its moment as few books of this generation have.

Rhodes Scholar Sherif Girgis, Heritage Foundation Fellow Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George offer a devastating critique of the idea that equality requires redefining marriage. They show why both sides must first answer the question of what marriage really *is*. They defend the principle that marriage, as a comprehensive union of mind and body ordered to family life, unites a man and a woman as husband and wife, and they document the social value of applying this principle in law.

Most compellingly, they show that those who embrace same-sex civil marriage leave no firm ground—none—for not recognizing every relationship describable in polite English, including polyamorous sexual unions, and that enshrining their view would further erode the norms of marriage, and hence the common good.

Finally, *What Is Marriage?* decisively answers common objections: that the historic view is rooted in bigotry, like laws forbidding interracial marriage; that it is callous to people's needs; that it can't show the harm of recognizing same-sex couplings, or the point of recognizing infertile ones; and that it treats a mere "social construct" as if it were natural, or an unreasoned religious view as if it were rational.

If the marriage debate in America is decided soon, it will be with this book's help or despite its powerful arguments.

What Is Marriage?: Man and Woman: A Defense Details

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From Reader Review What Is Marriage?: Man and Woman: A Defense for online ebook

Ann says

4.5 stars.

An important book.

This book presents a non-religious (and largely non-historical) argument in favor of traditional one man/one woman marriage. Their defense is philosophical and very carefully reasoned. They are thorough and respectful. At the heart of their claims is the statement that the current same-sex marriage debate is not about homosexuality but about marriage; that marriage as we know it deserves to remain a distinct thing regardless of the clamor to call other things by its name.

If you are an advocate of any other kind/definition of marriage and wonder how sane, intelligent, compassionate people can disagree with you, this book will give you an excellent non-bigoted explanation.

Or if you are in favor of one man/one woman marriage strictly because your religious convictions align you with that view, reading this book will broaden your perspective and allow you to defend your position without the unhelpful "homosexuality is sin" refrain.

I give it only 4.5 stars simply because my puny brain at times began to drown in the philosophical complexities presented. Sometimes I had to reread and reread again before it was clear to me what they were saying. This was only in a couple of the chapters; most of it was very accessible. And I attribute the difficulty mostly to the cobwebby sleep-deprived mommy brain I'm currently working with and not to any particular weakness of the authors.

Paul Rhodes says

One of my former "friends" on Goodreads claimed that my stance on gay "marriage" committed me to at the very least tolerating a systematic slaughter of homosexuals. So, if I don't believe that it is good public policy to bestow legal recognition upon relationships based upon mutual masturbation, that must mean that I do not care if the state rounds up gays and lesbians and shoves them into gas chambers. The scary thing is that there are now enough people who sincerely believe this warped logic to overthrow some dictator of a fair-sized Banana Republic. And they would do more good if they devoted their efforts to the actual overthrow of such a dictator than worry about the traditional definition of marriage paving the way for a Homosexual Auschwitz.

Anyway, this book is just fantastic. But it must be said that a society that needs a book to tell it why marriage is the union of a man and a woman is really quite stupid. Yeah, yeah, I know. First, they defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and I didn't stand up, and then, before I knew it, they were packing the homosexuals off to Treblinka. Geez.

Michael Nichols says

A methodical articulation of what makes marriage what it fundamentally is. This work relies solely on reason, as opposed to revelation or religious authority, to carefully advance its thesis: marriage is an exclusive, permanent relationship between a man and a woman. By sticking with natural law, the authors make the common good the goal of the argument.

The culture wars over marriage today seem charged with and perpetuated by the rhetorical tools of ethos and pathos, but tend to lack logos. Then again, why would arguments incorporate logos if marriage is the relationship of deepest emotional attachment and expression? (Hint, hint: the authors think emotional attachment and expression aren't sufficient warrants for recognizing a relationship as a marriage.)

While this book is quite convincing, many will unfortunately dismiss it out of hand simply because it relies so heavily on reasoned argumentation. In a fiery debate that is deeply personal for many people, what can careful, cold logic contribute? So the thinking goes. It's understandable, but unfounded. We do need careful, reasoned deliberation about the heart of the issue: what *is* marriage? This book is gently, but astutely answers that crucial question.

Jeremy says

I heard Sherif speak at Baylor on Feb. 6, 2014. He argued that marriage should be exclusive and permanent, and his main support was that children have the best likelihood of becoming responsible citizens if they are raised by their own biological parents. Furthermore, a public good (such as developing responsible citizens) requires public regulation. So no, we don't regulate BFFs, but marriage and children lead to significant social consequences. Every view of marriage draws the line somewhere (e.g., polygamy, incest, bestiality), and line-drawing without explanations (if "marriage" is simply an emotional connection, they *why* prohibit polygamy, incest, or bestiality?) seems arbitrary. Recent APA studies claiming that there is no difference in children raised by heterosexual couples and homosexual couples have flawed methodology (e.g., samples weren't random).

The argument of this book is not religious, but it fits with Scriptural principles. A useful summary/review is [here](#).

Alastair Roberts has some thoughts on "arguments and evidences from the creational order against same sex marriage" [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Tangent:

In an interview with *WORLD* (based on a talk at PHC), Carl Trueman says that this book on marriage "is probably the single greatest and most unanswerable natural law case for traditional marriage, and [it] has probably persuaded nobody to change his opinion." I don't know what this means. "God can't use (and has never used) a book to change people's minds"? That can't be what he means, given the fact that God gave us a book for *some* reason. Trueman's comment here sounds similar to a point he's made before on a podcast (start at 19:22) about Kuyper's ineffectiveness in ultimately transforming Dutch culture, despite having a newspaper, a university, a political party, and being prime minister. Trueman's advice to Kuyperian "transformationalists" is to dramatically scale down their ambitions, because "What Kuyper did ultimately amounted culturally to nothing."

Trueman says, "I'm an 'ordinary means of grace' guy; I'm not a 'Two Kingdoms' guy." But I'm not sure what he means by disavowing his inclusion in the 2K camp, because he often does say 2K-like things (e.g.,

claiming that civic work isn't Christian work—pro-life work must be done as civilians, *not* Christians).

Katty says

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this book do not represent the views of this Goodreads user. This is an exercise in reading viewpoints contradictory to my own in an attempt to increase insight and understanding.

On a certain level, there are things to appreciate about this book. Not because I agree with the premise or thesis, but because the presentation is generally better than anything else I've seen on the same topic. The writing is eloquent overall (though the author did occasionally bloviate). The points are made without resorting to petty or offensive remarks. It doesn't outright condemn homosexuality itself, rant about how "the gays are ruining 'Merica!", or attempt to use the Bible as evidence. For that, it's already a step above many preceding books on the same topic.

However, even in my attempt to be as objective and unbiased as possible, I still found serious flaws in this book and its claims and couldn't bring myself to rate it above one star. Several outlandish claims are made about how keeping marriage between one man and one woman is for "the common good", yet little is used to back up or justify this perspective. These are the main points that came across as, at best, incomplete, and, at worst, extremely problematic, discriminatory, or outright false:

Its hyper-focus on family and child rearing. The book talks at length about procreation and how rearing children enriches marriage. I'm sure this is true in some cases (though not all), but it grossly ignores two highly important things. Firstly, that children and marriage are two separate things. While they often overlap, one can certainly exist without the other. If children were a requirement for marriage, then why would it be available to straight couples who can't or choose not to have children? Why do many people who want children wait a few years because they want to spend time one-on-one with their spouse? The inherent purpose of marriage is unity with a romantic partner, not a gateway to raising kids.

It also doesn't acknowledge the role same-sex couples can and do have in raising children. Once again, marriage and children can be separate things, and many gay couples have raised kids together without being legally married. Not only has it been proven that this is not detrimental to children, but in some aspects, it can be an advantage. Children are much more likely to be planned and wanted in same-sex relationships and both parents are more likely to remain committed to their well-being.

It fails to acknowledge that same-sex couples are sexual and that their relationship is more than just deep friendship. The book claims that the "revisionist view" of marriage can't explain any systematic differences between marriage and deep friendship. It doesn't take into account the aspects of same-sex relationships that involve sex or romantic love. Once again, the author goes into many claims about the purpose of sex being reproduction and how that negates the validity of same-sex marriage. But, like marriage, sex is often separate from reproduction and few engage in sexual behavior solely for the purpose of procreation.

It claims that polyamorous unions are inevitable if we legalize same-sex marriage. To an extent, I get where the author is coming from with this, but once again, he fails to address evidence against this. For example, many countries in Europe have legalized same-sex marriage without going on to legalize polyamory. The arguments against polyamory also aren't solid because, once again, they are based entirely on the concept of procreation and children, not marriage itself. The portions of the book covering this read like scare tactics being used to dissuade us from supporting same-sex marriage.

There are contradictions and inconsistencies. For example, early in the book the author claims that gay marriage would be harmful for adoption purposes because it's had negative effects on Catholic adoption services (for this, he blames gay couples, instead of the Catholic organizations that practice discrimination). Then he goes on to claim that reproduction is vital for civilization because the closer children are related to their caretakers, the better. Implying that reproduction is superior to raising non-biological children and essential to a successful marriage seems to be a stance more detrimental to adoption than same-sex couples, even with uncompliant Catholic organizations.

Additionally, the author states in the beginning that he intends to write from a philosophical viewpoint, not invoking history or social science. Yet when he writes, he does refer to history or social science when it's beneficial for his claim. For example, he mentions that traditionally marriages were consummated by coitus and that same-sex couples cannot partake in that (because their sex doesn't "count"), therefore they cannot achieve a bodily union. He also cites studies that show that children fare best under the care of biological parents (this claim itself is murky and once again places all the focus on child rearing).

It claims that laws tend to shape behaviors and values, and will change how we regard marriage.

Again, a flimsy claim at best. There are many legal things the majority finds unethical or morally wrong and some illegal things that many do not have a serious problem with. For example, it's legal to express racist or sexist views and discriminate against others in a myriad of ways. It's legal to cheat on your partner. It's legal to lie to your family and friends. Yet those are all things that most people would object to because they go against most of our values. On the other side, many things that are technically against the law, such as driving a few miles over the speed limit, are not seen as immoral. Additionally, the author still fails to provide compelling reasons for why same-sex marriage will have harmful effects on straight marriage.

It claims that same-sex marriage threatens moral and religious freedom. If same-sex couples are allowed to marry, the author claims, then certain people will have to violate their beliefs or morals in order to provide services for gay couples. We will get to the point where supporting "conjugal marriage" instead of "revisionist marriage" will be treated like racism, causing people with those views to be marginalized and stigmatized. Basically, the author argues that by discriminating against gay people, we avoid discrimination against others. This puts religious values and needs above those of gay people and essentially justifies their discrimination.

There are some subtle, yet still disturbing, implications throughout. The author often implies that straight married couples provide the best environment for children (because everything goes back to children) and should therefore stay that way. He's either evasive or critical on the subject of divorce. While in a perfect world all marriages would last forever, that in no way aligns with reality, and divorce is sometimes the best option. Divorce can be devastating, but spending years in an unhappy, dysfunctional marriage can be as bad or worse for all involved.

When discussing infertility, there are implications that the infertile couple suffers a huge loss. This is true, but the author claims that this loss is to their marriage and implies that it cannot function as well as a marriage that involves children. It's this dismissive, demeaning attitude that can increase the pain of infertility for couples and make them more prone to blaming themselves for infertility instead of attributing it to unfortunate luck and circumstances.

I could go on until this review is triple the length it is now, but I'll stop here. Reading this was beneficial in the sense that it gave insight into non-religious arguments against same-sex marriage and, honestly, showed how weak they are. As I stated in the beginning of my review, this book is far superior to most like it. But it still promotes discrimination, uses flawed reasoning, and overall fails to offer any kind of constructive, convincing case against same-sex marriage.

Douglas Wilson says

This is a book that needs to be carefully read by every pastor and Christian leader. We live in a time that cries out for careful definitions for just about everything, and this book supplies us with a careful definition of marriage.

It does so in the realm of common grace. In other words, the arguments here are philosophical, historical, and sociological, not exegetical. But what they argue is fully consistent with Scripture, and I believe the book helpfully addresses some areas that exegetical arguments frequently do not.

In other words, the "traditional" view of marriage should not be understood as a practice of marriage on autopilot, with no one quite knowing what they were doing or why. The issues before us now have been thoroughly dealt with over the course of centuries, and the modern novelties simply have not done their homework. Fortunately for them, homework is not necessary if the approach you are taking is that of raw judicial tyranny.

For example, the ancient Greeks had the same basic understanding of marriage as modern traditionalists do, while at the same time celebrating homo-eroticism. This means that while they did not have a scriptural understanding of sexual morality, they did define marriage correctly -- and that definition cannot simply be dismissed (in secular terms) as "homophobic." In a similar way, how can it be "homophobic" to say that two men cannot consummate a marriage by means of (say) fellatio, when the tradition has always consistently held that a heterosexual couple cannot consummate a marriage that way either?

This is a very helpful book. Even in those places where I might find myself differing with something, I found the reasoning here to be careful, judicious, and on point.

"Rigorously pursued, the logic of rejecting the conjugal conception of marriage thus leads, by way of formlessness, toward pointlessness" (p. 21).

Robert says

An excellent argument in favor of conjugal marriage (as being the union between a man and a woman). Without utilizing any religious arguments the authors offer convincing philosophical and sociological arguments for why marriage is appropriate only between a man and a woman, and by doing so outline a very reasonable and fundamental ground upon which all people--regardless of faith--must agree if they are to remain rational. This book is illuminating for people from all faiths and traditions. If you would like to reflect on the inherent wisdom that is found within our oldest social institution, then I highly recommend this book.

Because there are already plenty of helpful reviews about this book, let me just state two things that stood out for me:

1) The authors reference excellent sources. Embedded in the chapters are footnotes that make up a bibliography filled with invaluable resources, many of which I had never heard about it. For example, one author referenced that I have begun to read is Mark Oppenheimer, who wrote a great piece in the New York Times entitled, "A Gay Catholic Voice against Same-Sex Marriage." I have had many invaluable insights from his writings. Be sure to follow up the readings contained in this great bibliography!

2)Chapter 2 (Comprehensive Union) is exceptionally written. It gives much needed clarity to the debate

going on about marriage. Here the authors argue that marriage has three basic features that all people can agree on: unifying activity, unifying goods, and unifying commitment. These three features are expounded to be: first, the unification of two people in their most basic dimensions, in their minds AND bodies (which obviously can ONLY occur between a man and a woman); second, their unification with respect to procreation, family life, and marriage's broad domestic sharing; and third, that marriage unites the couple permanently and exclusively. The authors show how the conjugal view of marriage includes these three features, and if any of these features are left out or changed then the union could not properly be called a marriage but some other type of union.

Weronika Janczuk says

Some things need to be articulated upfront: The book is a proactive defense of the conjugal view of marriage -- that marriage ought to be between one man and one woman, whose marital arrangement is ordered toward bodily organic union as a means of satisfying both intimacy and procreation. Many pieces of the authors' argument is made in reference to same-sex marriage only because same-sex marriage is the prevalent political topic; the book was in no way written as a critique of same-sex marriage, though a critique of both same-sex marriage and the revisionist view of history (which rejects all historical and natural law reasons for the conjugal view's validity) is implicit in this defense.

The book is remarkable -- short and concise, the authors develop a syllogism, starting with premises that ought to be considered self-evident but no longer are: that a sexual union between man and woman only lends itself to procreation, and thus MARRIAGE -- the authors are concerned with redefining the terminology, which will have major implications on policy, on understandings of friendships and other less emotionally intimate relationships -- ought to be protected as the medium in which children are born and raised. The authors cite numerous studies that reveal the necessity of a biological mother and a biological father for a child's complete development, among many other sociological data that shows the inability of same-sex relationships to sustain themselves over long periods of time, etc.; because of the value of children, only heterosexual marriage lends itself to exclusivity and permanence, more so than any homosexual relationship, and this offers value on a personal and social level.

The authors deeply complicate relatively common arguments in a cohesive case for the conjugal view, arguing that granting rights to a relationship whose only characteristic is vocalized emotional intimacy is insufficient grounds for an institution that protects individuals and, by extension, society.

Most beneficial are, I think, the authors' responses to common critiques of the conjugal defense, as well as the appendix, which offers an extended philosophical defense of organic bodily union as the necessary starting point for defining, understanding, and protecting marriage.

Jim Janknegt says

Answers the question posed in the title with in-depth logical arguments. Highly recommend!!

Scott says

Recently published work that defends the conjugal/traditional view of marriage against many revisionist

views today. Regardless of where one stands on the marriage issue, the points this book raises are worth answering. Not only that, but the authors are charitable and make explicit mention that the marriage debate is *not* about homosexuality, but about what exactly marriage is in the first place.

Sarah Bronte Connor says

i am a atheist but i am against the radical behavior and actions that GLBTP have been doing to everyone since 17 years ago all over the world and also at goverment public schools.
and believe or not i have several gay males friends that also dont agreed with the fanatic radical GBLTP agenda and that also agreed that children are better with a mother and father just like mister Rupert James Hector Everett sayed last year in a interview!!!

Peter N. says

An excellent overview of the natural law argument for marriage from a legal perspective. They point out there are two views of marriage today: the conjugal view and the revisionist view. The conjugal view is rooted in sexual union between men and women, often leads to procreation, and promotes the common good of society by creating a healthy domestic sphere.

The revisionist view essentially roots marriage in an emotional union of people who are strongly attracted to each. Sex can or cannot be a part of the equation. While they are clearly aiming at same-sex marriage hetero marriages have for some time been built on this emotional union idea, which has lead quite naturally to no-fault divorces.

The strength of this book is that it forces the reader to ask what is unique about marriage? What separates marriage from other relationships, such as siblings, parents, good friends, etc.? They show that same-sex couples can have the legal protection they want without entering into a marriage. I also became more convinced of the need for public policy concerning marriage. My approach has often been that the government should stay out of marriage. There is some truth to that. But they make a solid claim that the government and its citizens have a vested interest in defining and protecting marriage.

They do not use Biblical or theological arguments, but what they say fits nicely in a Christian worldview, though it has been held by non-Christians around the world.

I found it funny that people complained about the book not being winsome enough. It was originally written for The Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy. Why would you come to the book expecting anything other than lawyer speak?

My Rating System

1 Star-Terrible book and dangerous. Burn it in the streets.

2 Stars-Really bad book, would not recommend, probably has some dangerous ideas in it or could just be so poorly written/researched that it is not worth reading. Few books I read are 1 or 2 stars because I am careful about what I read.

3 Stars-Either I disagree with it at too many points to recommend it or it is just not a good book on the

subject or for the genre. Would not read it again, reference it, or recommend it. But it is not necessarily dangerous except as a time waster.

4 Stars-Solid book on the subject or for the genre. This does not mean I agree with everything in it. I would recommend this book to others and would probably read it again or reference it. Most books fall in this category because I try not to read books I don't think will be good. There is a quite a variety here. 3.6 is pretty far from 4.5.

5 Stars-Excellent book. Classic in the genre or top of the line for the subject. I might also put a book in here that impacted me personally at the time I read it. I would highly recommend this book, even if I do not agree with all that it says.

Bojan Tunguz says

A few years ago a good friend of mine sent me a link to an article in a prestigious sounding, albeit to me quite obscure, academic journal. At the best of times I am reluctant to read academic articles outside of my field of expertise, but just a few lines into this one I realized that what I was reading was not your typical run-of-the-mill journalese exercise in obfuscation. The article was lucid and remarkably accessible for such a tightly reasoned and logical piece. This was all the more remarkable considering that the article was on a topic that had a lot of momentous legal and cultural implications: the nature of marriage.

From the outset that article was remarkable for what it was not. It was not an article about homosexuality, and it invoked no religious arguments. In fact, it relied on no explicit ethical framework, aside from the very basic assumptions of intellectual honesty, consistency, and an appeal to the general public good. Many of the points and ideas in that article I, together with others, had thought of before, but never in such a systematic and consistent way. Other points and arguments were entirely new to me. This is not entirely surprising. So many of us have taken the basic structure of marriage – one man and one woman in a permanent exclusive union with each other ordered towards raising of a family – for granted. Imagining alternative arrangements was inconceivable, and even more so were the various arguments that would exclude or include various changes of the fundamental structure of marriage.

Needless to say, the article has caused quite a stir since it had come out. It was, quite predictably, attacked from various corners. Most of the attacks, even more predictably, were not based on any disagreement over the arguments presented and their validity, but were by and large a very shrill and uninformed attack on the authors and their views. Nonetheless, there were a sufficient number of coherent arguments against the article that needed to be addressed, and many of the article's original arguments could have been further expanded and elaborated upon. The result is this book-length treatment of this very contentious topic.

The point of the article, and this subsequent book, is very simple. There is an objectively valid, robust, and consistent definition of what marriage is. This view has very deep roots not only in the customs and the laws of human society, but in the very physical nature of human beings. All the proposed alternatives to this view raise even more questions than they answer. There either is an objective reality of the institution that we call marriage, or there isn't. If the former is true, then deciding on what marriage really is and how we know what it is should be the first and the most fundamental task that any policy advocate should embark on. If, on the other hand, there is no such thing as an objective definition of marriage, then all cries of "discrimination" and "human rights" are just an empty rhetoric. This book and its authors are very clear about where they stand, and have gone to a great length to support their position. The result is a book that is very probing, informative, and eminently logical and reasonable. It is also, just like the article on which it was based, a very well written and engaging read. Even after being familiar with most of its points, I was still spellbound

and could not put it down.

This is ultimately a very hopeful book. It is not only hopeful about the institution of marriage and its future, but even more so about the possibility and prospect of clear and articulate argument holding sway in the public discourse. This is a very noble, even courageous, stance to take. Unfortunately I don't share in this optimism. As I mentioned earlier, the authors were very clear in stating what this book is not: it's not a book about homosexuality, and it is not a book about religion. However, I am fully convinced that the present drive for the redefinition of marriage is in fact primarily driven by the homosexual agenda, and to the (slightly) lesser extent by the animus towards religion. It is the latest front line in the protracted culture wars, and right now it is the one that is grabbing most of the headlines. With the help of the hindsight and the experience of four decades of the bruising wars over abortion, it is clear that we are just in the opening stages of a very long battle. I have serious reservations about how many minds will be changed by this book. Its full import may lay in giving the full comfort and intellectual clarity to those of us willing to engage in this fight for marriage and all that it entails for the prospering of civilization and human community in general. That alone makes this book worth reading and rereading. I expect to come to this book and its arguments often in the years ahead.

Nathan Duffy says

Excellent natural law defense of the conjugal/traditional view of marriage. The self-satisfied, self-righteous, and self-deluded proponents of marriage revisionism, who confidently declare that there exist no cogent objections to their position, will quickly learn otherwise if they have the gumption to open this text.

James Smith says

THE book to read on this issue. Rigorous argument, but not as imaginatively winsome as it needs to be to capture hearts & minds. People need to not only convinced but captivated by this understanding of marriage. That's going to take a novel. And people living beautiful marriages.
