

Save Marriage? It's Too Late.

The Pill made same-sex nuptials inevitable.

By DONALD SENSING- Updated March 15, 2004

Opponents of legalized same-sex marriage say they're trying to protect a beleaguered institution, but they're a little late. The walls of traditional marriage were breached 40 years ago; what we are witnessing now is the storming of the last bastion.

Marriage is primarily a social institution, not a religious one. That is, marriage is a universal phenomenon of human cultures in all times and places, regardless of the religion of the people concerned, and has taken the same basic form in all those cultures. Marriage existed long before Abraham, Jesus or any other religious figure. The institution of marriage is literally prehistoric.

The three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) actually recognize this explicitly in their holy writings. The book of Genesis ascribes the foundation of marriage in the very acts of God himself in the creation of the world: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him. . . . A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:18, 24).

The three great religions base their definition of marriage on these verses and others that echo them. In Christian theological terms, the definition of marriage is part of the natural law of the creation; therefore, the definition may not be changed by human will except in peril to the health of human community.

Psychobiologists argue that marriage evolved as a way of mediating the conflicting reproductive interests of men and women. It was the means by which a woman could guarantee to a specific man that the children she bore were his. In biological terms, men can sire hundreds of children in their lives, but this biological ability is limited by the fact that no one woman can keep pace.

Siring kids by multiple women is the only way men can achieve high levels of reproduction, but there is no adaptive advantage for women in bearing children by men who are simply trying to sire as many children as possible. For a mother, carrying and raising a child is a resource-intensive, years-long business. Doing it alone is a marked adaptive disadvantage for single mothers and their children.

So the economics of sex evolved into a win-win deal. Women agreed to give men exclusive sexual rights and guaranteed paternity in exchange for their sexual loyalty and enduring assistance with childbearing and -rearing. The man's promise of sexual loyalty meant that he would expend his labor and resources supporting her children, not another woman's. For the man, this arrangement lessens the number of potential children he can sire, but it ensures that her kids are his kids. Guaranteed sex with one woman also enabled him to conserve his resources and energies for other pursuits than repetitive courtship, which consumes both greatly.

Weddings ceremoniously legitimated the sexual union of a particular man and woman under the guidance of the greater community. In granting this license, society also promised structures beneficial to children arising from the marriage and ensuring their well-being.

Society's stake in marriage as an institution is nothing less than the perpetuation of the society itself, a matter of much greater than merely private concern. Yet society cannot compel men and women to bring forth their replacements. Marriage as conventionally defined is still the ordinary practice in Europe, yet the birthrate in most of Europe is now less than the replacement rate, which will have all sorts of dire consequences for its future.

Today, though, sexual intercourse is delinked from procreation. Since the invention of the Pill some 40 years ago, human beings have for the first time been able to control reproduction with a very high degree of assurance. That led to what our grandparents would have called rampant promiscuity. The causal relationships between sex, pregnancy and marriage were severed in a fundamental way. The impulse toward premarital chastity for women was always the fear of bearing a child alone. The Pill removed this fear. Along with it went the need of men to commit themselves exclusively to one woman in order to enjoy sexual relations at all. Over the past four decades, women have trained men that marriage is no longer necessary for sex. But women have also sadly discovered that they can't reliably gain men's sexual and emotional commitment to them by giving them sex before marriage.

Nationwide, the marriage rate has plunged 43% since 1960. Instead of getting married, men and women are just living together, cohabitation having increased tenfold in the same period. According to a University of Chicago study, cohabitation has become the norm. More than half the men and women who do get married have already lived together.

The widespread social acceptance of these changes is impelling the move toward homosexual marriage. Men and women living together and having sexual relations "without benefit of clergy," as the old phrasing goes, became not merely an accepted lifestyle, but the dominant lifestyle in the under-30 demographic within the past few years. Because they are able to control their reproductive abilities--that is, have sex without sex's results--the arguments against homosexual consanguinity began to wilt.

When society decided--and we have decided, this fight is over--that society would no longer decide the legitimacy of sexual relations between particular men and women, weddings became basically symbolic rather than substantive, and have come for most couples the shortcut way to make the legal compact regarding property rights, inheritance and certain other regulatory benefits. But what weddings do not do any longer is give to a man and a woman society's permission to have sex and procreate.

Sex, childbearing and marriage now have no necessary connection to one another, because the biological connection between sex and childbearing is controllable. The fundamental basis for marriage has thus been technologically obviated. Pair that development with rampant, easy divorce without social stigma, and talk in 2004 of "saving marriage" is pretty specious. There's little there left to save. Men and women today who have successful, enduring marriages till death do them part do so in spite of society, not because of it.

If society has abandoned regulating heterosexual conduct of men and women, what right does it have to regulate homosexual conduct, including the regulation of their legal and property relationship with one another to mirror exactly that of hetero, married couples?

I believe that this state of affairs is contrary to the will of God. But traditionalists, especially Christian traditionalists (in whose ranks I include myself) need to get a clue about what has really been going on and face the fact that same-sex marriage, if it comes about, will not cause the degeneration of the institution of marriage; it is the result of it.

Rev. Sensing is pastor of the Trinity United Methodist Church in Franklin, Tenn. He writes at DonaldSensing.com.