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Marriage much more than legal benefits

BY DAVID FOWLER • MAY 27, 2008

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Debates are often won and lost based on how the key terms are defined. In the cultural war, the California Supreme Court just threw down the gauntlet with their recent redefinition of marriage. Advocates of real marriage need not fear, but they must understand how to respond.

Those who want to reduce marriage to the least common denominator want to appeal to our sympathies. So, they begin the debate by urging us to look at marriage as simply a status to which the law provides certain benefits. From there it is easy to play on our sense of "fairness" by arguing that its not fair for some to get those benefits and not others.



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But for this kind of logic to work, it is necessary to reduce marriage to nothing more than love between committed adults. Defined this way everyone can have the "benefits of marriage" and life is "fair." But, while love and commitment are important for marriage, they are not enough to constitute a marriage.

To consider the legal benefits of marriage and who gets them before defining marriage is to put the proverbial cart before the horse. It is not the legal benefits given by society that make something a marriage. Rather, it is the nature of marriage that motivates society to give it certain legal benefits.

a unique relationship

The point is that marriage is not a relationship that society created in order to give some people benefits and deny them to others. Rather,

"marriage" is the name that societies worldwide have given to a unique relationship between men and women that provides particular benefits to society.

By analogy, there are many geometric shapes. The word "square" represents one type of shape and "circle" another, but because each is what it is by definition, we cannot make circles that look like squares or vice versa. Likewise, there are many different relationships, even very important ones, but they are not marriages.

In other words, marriage is a real thing, not just a word. And marriage is important not because it has been given certain benefits.

Rather, real marriage is given benefits (and imposed with obligations) because it adds value to society in a way that it is different from any other relationship. That value is the healthy preservation of society itself.

Specifically, what makes the committed relationship between a man and woman different and of such importance to a healthy future society is its natural procreative potential and the unique roles each sex adds to the nurturing of the children they may raise.

To define other relationships as marriage so that everyone gets the same legal benefits is akin to redefining what a college diploma means so everyone can get a better paying job.

The California Supreme Court started its analysis in the wrong place and naturally ended in the wrong place. When marriage is reduced, its unique place in society is diminished. Doing so ultimately undermines the welfare of children and society itself.

David Fowler is president of Family Action Council of Tennessee.

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