



Complementarity in Marriage: What it is and Why it Matters

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Men and women are different.

This self-evident and clichéd claim is no longer as uncontroversial as, historically, it once was. According to a 2011 report from the American Psychological Association,

Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female, or something else; gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics ... Transgender people experience their transgender identity in a variety of ways and may become aware of their transgender identity at any age.¹

This statement includes a reference to an undefined but apparently defining "internal sense" and the concurrent argument that one can recognize his or her transgenderism "at any age." Such an assumption has stunning implications for the way law, society, and family all function.

But before we examine that assumption, let's start here: what's the deal with exclusively male-female unions?

The Nature of Marriage

Organizations like Freedom to Marry, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and the Human Rights Campaign argue that "marriage equality" is a matter of justice: If two same-sex partners (1) love one another romantically and (2) volitionally choose to wed, there should be no legal impediments to their doing so. They assert that such impediments imply some combination of ignorance, religious bigotry, or fear – i.e. "homo-phobia."

But the claim of injustice is itself unjust. Because people want to do something that does not adversely affect those immediately around them (e.g., neighbors or co-workers) does not mean they should be allowed to do so. Society is organic and, thus, so is harm. Same-sex unions do not threaten healthy natural marriages but, rather, they undermine the meaning and nature of marriage and, thereby, the well-being of countless families.

Let's explore this further. We have laws against myriad "victimless" crimes (substance abuse, prostitution, etc.) not only because they harm individuals but because they degrade society. Consensual homosexual unions might cause no apparent distress to persons proximate to them,

but they distort and diminish our shared, public understanding of marriage. Without that true understanding, our civilization will erode ever more quickly.

For example, children raised by same-sex couples are sent an unmistakable message: gender differences are sufficiently unimportant that they should have no effect on male/female relationships. This perspective could well have detrimental influence on the child's understanding of the opposite sex.

Perhaps more importantly, as will be noted below, same sex marriage argues that gender is inconsequential to unions. This runs counter to experience and common sense—and erodes marriage and the culture it supports.

How does such distortion and diminishment occur? If affection and consent are the only criteria for a marital relationship, then logically any kind of consensual union should be permissible. This opens to the door to polygamy, polyamory, polyandry, and other types of marital relationships. This is not an aspersive comment, but simply a logical deduction. But marriage, redefined to include many types of union based exclusively on affection and consent, loses the stability and uniqueness that monogamous, heterosexual marriages convey to their adult partners and the children those adults produce and protect.

So, what are the reasons and merits for natural marriage?

To begin, Judaism and Christianity clearly teach that the only divinely-sanctioned sexually intimate relationship is that which exists between a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage. This means all other sexual unions, heterosexual or homosexual, are prohibited.²

No one is required to accept this belief; religious liberty is foundational to the American republic. However, the moral ground of the republic is Judeo-Christian. This was the worldview of the Founders. Our national morality cannot be transient or arbitrary: if not Judeo-Christian, then what? As Dr. Andreas Kostenberger observes in his Family Research Council (FRC) booklet, "The Bible's Teaching on Marriage and the Family," "Marriage is a covenant, a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and publicly entered into before God and normally consummated by sexual intercourse."³

Marriage Essential to Procreation

Human biology and physiology also make it plain that men and women are created to mate and reproduce. Complementarity seems self-evidently biological; explanations of such things as heterosexual intercourse, conception, or birth only serve to vindicate and illustrate it. Such modern manipulations of the reproductive process as heterosexual surrogacy and physician-conducted implantation of sperm from two male partners into a single womb only make the point that the natural sexual relationship is inherently heterosexual.

FRC's Senior Fellow for Policy Studies, Peter Sprigg, argues: "Marriage has always been defined as a male-female union for two simple reasons: Society needs children, and a child needs a mom and a dad. Only the union of a man and a woman can naturally produce a child, and the

marriage of a man and a woman is what is most likely to provide a child with a stable home shared with both the child's mother and father.”⁴

The Heritage Foundation’s Ryan Anderson agrees:

Redefining marriage does not simply expand the existing understanding of marriage. It rejects the anthropological truth that marriage is based on the complementarity of man and woman, the biological fact that reproduction depends on a man and a woman, and the social reality that children need a mother and a father. Redefining marriage to abandon the norm of male–female sexual complementarity would also make other essential characteristics – such as monogamy, exclusivity, and permanency – optional. Marriage cannot do the work that society needs it to do if these norms are further weakened.⁵

These statements, once viewed as perfectly normative and reflective of transparent reality, are now seen as restrictive, unjust, and demeaning to men and women who experience same-sex attraction and want to fulfill it in a legally, socially, and even theologically recognized union. That this latter and counterfactual perspective is heralded as a moral good is a troubling commentary on American public life.

Marriage as a Complementary Union of Genders

Yet apart from its procreative aspect, natural marriage is important for another reason: Men and women are different, not just in morphology (form) or physiognomy (appearance), but also neurologically and emotionally. They complement one another as persons, even as they complement one another as sexual partners (the two are intertwined, as such diverse theologians as Emil Brunner and John Piper have noted, but they are distinct).

This claim certainly is biblical; God made Adam a “suitable” partner for life and intimacy, a woman. But it’s also born-out in hard science: Men and women have very different ways of thinking and responding that affect judgment, preference, and conduct. They complement one another, making up for one another’s deficiencies and accentuating one another’s strengths. In other words, neither gender is either inferior or superior to the other – each is simply different. As a result, it is reasonable to deduce that men and women were (a) made for each other and (b) that the union of a husband and wife optimizes strengths and diminishes weaknesses.

Consider the following, taken from secular scientific sources:

Functional magnetic resonance imaging of men and women under stress showed neuroscientists how their brains differed in response to stressful situations. **In men, increased blood flow to the left orbitofrontal cortex suggested activation of the "fight or flight" response. In women, stress activated the limbic system, which is associated with emotional responses** ... Doctors say this information may someday lead to a screening process for mood disorders. "In the future, when physicians treat patients -- especially depression, PTSD -- they need to take this into account that really, gender matters," Dr. (Jiongjiong) Wang (Ph.D., a research assistant professor of radiology and neurology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia). Other experts caution that

hormones, genetics and environmental factors may influence these results, bringing to light yet another difference between men and women. Neuroscientists say the changes in the brain during stress response also lasted longer in women.⁶

According to Simon Baron-Cohen, PhD, author of *The Essential Difference: Male and Female Brains and the Truth About Autism*, **men's neurological wiring tends to make them better at systems, while women are superiorly rigged for empathy.** Which could help explain why – although the culture is changing – guys still take such pride in their machines, while women often care more about maintaining a clean home. Another clue comes from a 2007 study (conducted for BMW by a British team that included Oxford psychologists), which found that male drivers actually view their cars as extensions of themselves. Women, whose self-image is tied more directly to their bodies, are likely to think of their vehicles as separate entities, the authors suggest. But because men are less tuned-in to their bodies, they easily project their identity onto an object.⁷

Females and males maintain unique brain characteristics throughout life. Male brains, for instance, are about 10 percent larger than female brains. But bigger doesn't necessarily mean smarter. Disparities in how certain brain substances are distributed may be more revealing. Notably, male brains contain about 6.5 times more gray matter -- sometimes called "thinking matter" -- than women. Female brains have more than 9.5 times as much white matter, the stuff that connects various parts of the brain, than male brains. That's not all. "The frontal area of the cortex and the temporal area of the cortex are more precisely organized in women, and are bigger in volume," according to (professor of psychological sciences at the University of Missouri) David Geary. This difference in form may explain a lasting functional advantage that females seem to have over males: dominant language skills. **Most of these differences are complementary. They increase the chances of males and females joining together. It helps the whole species,** (says Ruben Gur, a neurologist at the University of Pennsylvania).⁸

Sex-related brain differences matter: Whilst we should be cautious about how we interpret sex-related brain differences (Cordelia Fine reminds us that "the male brain is like nothing in the world so much as a female brain"), **it's important not to take political correctness too far and deny that differences do exist.** The neuroscientist Larry Cahill makes this point in his 2006 paper "Why sex matters for neuroscience," in which he reviews many of the sex-related brain differences. Furthering our understanding of sex-related brain differences could help shed much needed light on conditions like autism and depression that tend to be found much more often in men and women, respectively.⁹

Studies of perception, cognition, memory and neural functions have found apparent gender differences. These differences may be attributed to various genetic, hormonal, and environmental factors and do not reflect any overall superiority advantage to either sex. Both sexes are equal in intelligence, but tend to operate differently. Men and women appear to use different parts of the brain to encode memories, sense emotions, recognize faces, solve certain problems and make decisions. Indeed, when men and women of similar intelligence and aptitude perform equally well, their brains appear to go about it differently, as if nature had separate blueprints. Sex differences in the brain

may play a role in learning processes, language development, and progression of neurologically-based diseases ... The male and the female brains show anatomical, functional and biochemical differences in all stages of life. These differences begin early during development due to a combination of genetic and hormonal events and continue throughout the lifespan of an individual, and are involved in many functions in health as well as in diseases.¹⁰

According to UC-Irvine professor Larry Cahill, we must take gender-based brain differences seriously. The differences exist at virtually all levels, he says, from those of tiny cells to large structures in the brain, from brain chemistry to what he calls intriguing differences in the way men and women remember emotionally searing events. And a failure to see the differences can have medical consequences ... **Male and female brains are like two mosaics – very similar in some respects, very different in others.**¹¹

The Journal of Neuroscience and *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, among many other scholarly publications, are replete with studies about male-female distinctions. These distinctions are not grounded in culture or environment, but genetics.

These distinctions greatly benefit children. Little ones need a female mother and a male father to obtain the full dimensionality of what it means to be human. They benefit from, and are profoundly shaped by, experiencing the full range of differences between a woman and a man as their parents. “Decades of social science, including the latest studies using large samples and robust research methods, show that children tend to do best when raised by a mother and a father,” writes Ryan Anderson.¹²

Why is this so hard for some to accept? Why is a virtually androgynous culture such a cherished goal for some feminists and why has it become politically incorrect to note that men and women are inherently different? Why must we “push against these tendencies in the interest of seeking a world in which both sexes are on average equally interested in and equally good at all worthy endeavors?” asks University of Virginia professor Steven E. Rhoads.

There is a certain unworldly quality to the suggestions that a just world would be one in which men and women do all things equally. This understanding would require that parents trying to tease out their children’s natural abilities should instead do their part to help achieve a society in which a higher percentage of people do things they are not interested in and not very good at.¹³

In a recent legal brief, FRC’s partners in the Alliance Defending Freedom summarized well the crux of the issue:

... longstanding research assert(s) the view that the ideal environment for raising children is a stable biological mother and father. The science on comparative parenting structures, especially the research on same-sex households, is relatively new. Therefore, a claim that another parenting structure provides the same level of benefit should be rigorously tested and based on sound methodologies and representative samples ... it is reasonable to conclude that a mother and father function as a complementary parenting unit and that each tends to contribute something unique and beneficial to child

development ... Current research on the psycho-social development of children continues to affirm that the complementarity of an intact family, with a mother and a father serving unique relational roles, is optimal for a child's healthy development.¹⁴

Sociologist David Popenoe of Rutgers University, in his classic book *Life Without Father*, underscores this argument:

The complementarity of male and female parenting styles is striking and of enormous importance to a child's overall development. . . . [F]athers express more concern for the child's long-term development, while mothers focus on the child's immediate well-being . . . [T]he disciplinary approach of fathers tends to be "firm" while that of mothers tends to be "responsive." While mothers provide an important flexibility and sympathy in their discipline, fathers provide ultimate predictability and consistency. Both dimensions are critical for an efficient, balanced, and humane childrearing regime.¹⁵

These differences do more than make for a good home for children; they create a union of two persons. Theologian Peter Jones writes:

Biblical oneness is the reconciliation or co-optation or bringing together of two distinct elements that have their own integrity and are joined together in common bonds but never lose their own identity. It is the joining of difference not sameness which produces the miracle of creativity where each brings to the table unique contributions and creates new elements (like a baby or a symphony). It is not a pagan *conjunctio oppositorum* where differences are blended into one reality so that each element is seeking itself in the other but not what only the other can produce, so that there is a reduction in what is produced. (personal note to author, September 18, 2013)

Marriage Ain't a Changin' ...

With apologies to Bob Dylan for yet another paraphrase of his famous lyric, marriage is what it is. Regardless of attempts (and even successes) to redefine it in law, the nature of the institution remains unchanged. Faux marriages, be they same-sex or polygamous or whatever, are not what their participants claim they are.

Men and women are created in "the image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:26-27). They have equal value before Him. But equality does not mean the absence of differences, which intellectual honesty requires us to acknowledge. Theologian Bruce Ware explains:

... while male is fully human, male is also male, not female; and while female is fully human, female is also female, not male. That is, while God did intend to create male and female as equal in their essential nature as human, he also intended to make them different expressions of that essential nature, as male and female reflect different ways, as it were, of being human.¹⁶

Procreation and complementarity are the twin facets of marriage as it is naturally, in terms of biology, neurology, morphology, and psychology. Neither procreation nor complementarity can be replicated in anything but a male-female union.

There should be no doubt that many same-sex partners love each other. There should be no argument about the reality of same-sex attraction in the lives of some men and women. But nor should these affirmations move us to redefine marriage to mean something that, innately, it can never be.

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¹ "Answers to Your Questions about Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression," American Psychiatric Association, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/transgender.pdf>.

² Rob Schwarzwaldner, "Leviticus, Jesus, and Homosexuality: Some Thoughts on Honest Interpretation," Family Research Council, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.frc.org/issueanalysis/leviticus-jesus-and-homosexuality-some-thoughts-on-honest-interpretation>.

³ Andreas Kostenberger, "The Bible's Teaching on Marriage and Family," Family Research Council, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.frc.org/brochure/the-bibles-teaching-on-marriage-and-family>.

⁴ Peter Sprigg, "Don't Do It, for the Kids," Family Research Council, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.frc.org/op-eds/dont-do-it-for-the-kids>.

⁵ Ryan T. Anderson, "Marriage: What It Is, Why It Matters, and the Consequences of Redefining It," March 11, 2013, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/03/marriage-what-it-is-why-it-matters-and-the-consequences-of-redefining-it>.

⁶ "Men Are From Mars: Neuroscientists Find That Men And Women Respond Differently to Stress," Science Daily, April 1, 2008, accessed October 7, 2013, http://www.sciencedaily.com/videos/2008/0403-men_are_from_mars.htm.

⁷ Carol Mithers, "The Male Brain: What's Really Going On In There," Oprah.com, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.oprah.com/relationships/Understanding-the-Male-Brain>.

⁸ "How Male and Female Brains Differ," WebMD, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.webmd.com/balance/features/how-male-female-brains-differ>.

⁹ Christian Jarrett, Ph.D, "Two Myths and Three Facts About the Differences in Men and Women's Brains," *Psychology Today*, July 20, 2012, accessed on October 7, 2013, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-myths/201207/two-myths-and-three-facts-about-the-differences-in-men-and-womens-brains>.

¹⁰ Zeenat F. Zaidi, "Gender Differences in Human Brain: A Review," *The Open Anatomy Journal*, February 11, 2010, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.benthamscience.com/open/toanatj/articles/V002/37TOANATJ.pdf>.

¹¹ Pat Brennan, "UCI researcher: male, female brains are different 'mosaics,'" *Orange County Register*, August 21, 2013, accessed on October 7, 2013, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/differences-382702-women-male.html>.

¹² Ryan T. Anderson, "Marriage: What It Is, Why It Matters, and the Consequences of Redefining It," March 11, 2013, accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/03/marriage-what-it-is-why-it-matters-and-the-consequences-of-redefining-it>.

¹³ Steven E. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004), pp. 42, 43

¹⁴ "Brief of *Amicus Curiae* Michigan Family Forum in Support of Defendants," Alliance Defending Freedom, August 21, 2013, accessed on October 7, 2013, <http://www.adfmedia.org/files/SnyderAmicus.pdf>.

¹⁵ David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 145-146

¹⁶ "Male and Female Complementarity and the Image of God," The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, accessed on October 7, 2013, <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/male-and-female-complementarity-and-the-image-of-god/>