

Can You Tell Me?

Withdrawing from Marriage

Question: *If marriage is redefined, should ministers withdraw from serving as agents of the State?*

Answer: Canada's Constitution allows Parliament to enact laws in relation to "marriage and divorce." In its determination to make same-sex marriage a "right," the Liberal government asked the Supreme Court for advice. In reference to marriage, the Court decided that the word "marriage" in the Constitution could extend to "same-sex marriage." This decision makes clear that Parliament has the power to enact a new definition of marriage as the union of "two persons," which would replace "a man and a woman." It is also clear from the decision that the Government is not required to mandate same-sex marriage. It could bring in a civil registration model that is not "same-sex marriage" if it wishes.

Obviously, the concept of same-sex marriage would have been unthinkable at the time of Confederation when the Constitution was written. Long before the founding of Canada, the Catholic and Protestant churches had established that marriage was a lifelong, exclusive union of one man and one woman who freely consented to join their lives for procreation and mutual comfort. From the dawn of European settlement the Christian concept of marriage has dominated throughout the history of Canada. Between the 1860s and the 1960s, the family was a centrally important social link for Canadians. Church attendance was something of a national norm. Membership and weekly attendance remained high through the 1950s. Most people believed that "sodomy, and all unnatural lusts" are grievous sins. It was generally agreed that even our natural biological structure teaches us that it is unnatural (Rom. 1: 26-27) for men to have sex with men, and women to have sex with women. Homosexuality was denounced as a perversion.

But the unthinkable will happen if Justice Minister Irwin Cotler has his way. He said that the government will introduce a bill to redefine marriage. If Parliament votes for the bill, same-sex marriage will become legal throughout the country. Prime Minister Paul Martin said that he will allow a free vote on this crucial issue. However, his cabinet will be forced to vote with the government, regardless of their convictions and those of their constituents. So much for Paul Martin's much vaunted slaying of the democratic deficit in Parliament! "But wait a moment", some have said. "Why get all excited? The sky has not fallen. The Supreme Court did say that churches that do not accept same-sex marriage will not be required to solemnize a same-sex marriage." Yes, the Supreme Court did say that "religious officials" cannot be forced to perform unions that are against their beliefs. And in the spirit of paternalism, the Justice minister stated that Christian churches can continue to function according to the definition of marriage that he deems discriminatory. Peter W. Hogg, former dean of Osgoode Hall Law School, argues, "This is the safeguard that should help to reconcile Canadians to what is, without doubt, a radical change in our laws." But Hogg is dead wrong. Canadian Christians will not be reconciled to the proposed change. Many Christians are now asking, "What should ministers do when the Canadian House of Commons passes the proposed Bill changing the definition of marriage?" In a *National Post* article, "Withdrawing from Marriage" Rev. Roland De Vries, a Presbyterian

minister in Montreal, argues that ministers should withdraw from co-operation with the state in the solemnization of marriage. He says that if the current state of affairs should prevail, he will most certainly return to the provincial government his authorization to perform weddings. He states that the new definition will not allow him to continue to participate in this shared responsibility with the federal and provincial governments. The proposed government's redefinition of marriage is at odds with his view of marriage as "a union between a man and a woman." De Vries then believes that if the new definition prevails, a Christian minister can no longer in good conscience, officiate at weddings in conjunction with the state. He would be doing so under a definition to which he cannot subscribe. I agree with Rev. De Vries. I suggest that every pastor should return his license to perform weddings to his provincial government. Let me explain my reasons.

Bible and Marriage

The government has no right to redefine marriage. A redefinition of marriage is a revolutionary act in the sight of God. It is an attempt to break with divine authority. It is taking a stand against the Lord (Ps. 2: 2). If the anti-Christian spirit of our time succeeds to eliminate marriage, it will drastically change our society and the spirit of the revolution will have won a most glorious victory, deeply wounding the Church and the Kingdom of God.

Marriage is not a human convention or social construct. God Himself ordained it and put His stamp of approval on it. Its origin goes back to paradise, the crown of God's wondrous creation and the beginning of the history of the human race. In marriage "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Our Lord added: "So then what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19: 6). Jesus emphatically stated that marriage is for a man and a woman. He was present at the wedding feast in Cana where He performed His first miracle. By His presence He showed that Christianity celebrates marriage between a husband and wife. The apostle Paul calls marriage of a man and a woman "a great mystery" that speaks of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5 :32). In the early church, couples begin their married life only after they had sought the Lord's blessing in the church. Ignatius (died ca. 110) said that a marriage should be performed in the church so that the marriage would not be according to the flesh, but "according to the Lord." The churches of the Reformation have an article in their church order that shows the preconditions, which must be fulfilled before a wedding is solemnized. It also states situations in which the church forbids the solemnization of a marriage. It notes that no minister has the right to solemnize a marriage, which would be clearly in conflict with the will of God as revealed in Scripture, such as marriage between a believer and unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6: 14). It would be unreasonable to unite in marriage, a couple who do not accept the authority of God's Word. Both the man and the woman must be believers. And if they are not, then such a wedding in the church is tantamount to a false oath. The Reformed churches also emphasize the doctrine of the covenant. Without marriage, not only society but also church life, is impossible. The Lord builds His Church through the generations. By the grace of God, children of a Christian family are members of the covenant. Obviously, this doctrine is totally at odds with the Liberal government's same-sex marriage proposal. The Synod of Embden (1571) required an interview to determine whether the couple were adherents of the "pure" religion. The Synod of Dort (1618-19) decided that marriages of

couples who were not members of the church, should not be solemnized publicly and with the blessing of the church.

A pastor is not in "the marriage business." He is not a servant of the state just because he has a license to perform weddings. In other words, the responsibility of the minister of the Gospel is first and foremost to God's Word and to the church of which he is a member.

Church and State

We must resist State influence in the affairs of the Church. This includes replacing the God-ordained marriage ordinance as revealed in Scripture with one defined by the State. We may not compromise our principles when the State undermines marriage by redefining it.

It is the holy calling of the Church to safeguard the sanctity of marriage. I am well aware that ministers are authorized to solemnize marriages; they act as duly appointed agents of the state in these instances. I have officiated at numerous weddings during my years in the pastorate. I also realize that when a marriage takes place at an official church service, a service of the Word, a minister acts not only as an agent of the state, but at the same time as an agent or office-bearer of the Church. But my responsibility is not first to the State but to the Church. In *The New Revised Church Order Commentary*, Monsma notes; "One might reason and say, But it is the state which gives the right to our ministers to solemnize marriages; consequently the Church has no right to tell the minister which marriage they are permitted to solemnize, and which marriages they shall refrain from solemnizing. To this it may be answered that the state gives this right because the Church has ordained them as ministers. Therefore, the Church has the right to exercise a measure of control over its ministers in this domain also.

The last word does not belong to the customs and laws of one's country, but to the ordinance and principles, which flow from God's creation order and are revealed in His Word. With a church ceremony, it is the divine law, which is paramount and the church of Christ herself, which is called to witness the event. Although not a sacrament, the Reformed churches always considered a wedding ceremony purely a church affair. Our forefathers also insisted that an ordained minister and not an elder, or a theological student should conduct the wedding. If a man and a woman want to marry, they can go to a civil magistrate or justice of the peace for the solemnization of their marriage, to make it valid before the law.

Immediately after the marriage in a civil ceremony a Christian man and woman may seek the blessing and support of their local church. Their marriage is then confirmed in the church, upon the authorization of the consistory concerned. A marriage ceremony then is the rite by which a couple seeks support and shares their joy, and publicly pledge commitment to each other in the presence of God, church, family, and friends.

Should ministers withdraw from officiating at weddings if Parliament redefines marriage? I believe they should.

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