

What is Marriage? – By Graham Irvine

- There is nothing nobler or more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends. Homer – the ancient Greek
- My advice to you is to get married. If you find a good wife, you'll be happy; if not, you'll become a philosopher. Socrates – the Greek philosopher

It would seem that the idea and practice of marriage goes back to the dawn of human history.

The purpose of this part of the presentation is to look at marriage from a purely anthropological point of view. Allen will deal with marriage within the context of the Christian faith but I think it is important to recognise that marriage is a human condition not just a Judao/Christian idea.

While I'm aware of the debate happening within Australian culture and politics today in regards to marriage it is not the purpose of this part of the evening to enter that debate except to present to you a possible answer to the question – what is marriage. After all if we cannot define what marriage is then how can we say if we agree or disagree with changes to the legal boundaries of marriage.

I want to take a walk through three books to see both the scope of the practice of marriage and to help us in our definition of marriage.

The first two books I'll refer from are;

The Family: A World History by Mary Jo Maynes and Ann Waltner

Marriage and Civilisation: How Monogamy made us Human by William Tucker

Maynes and Waltner trace the history of family via archaeological and anthropological evidence from around 7000 BCE. (My aim here is not to get caught up in the dates expressed but to see the flow of the story)

It was interesting to me that both the authors assumed from the beginning of their telling of the story of the family, that marriage, of some sort, was the natural environment for child rearing.

In East African archaeological sites dating from around 5000BCE, the presence of pottery goods from distant regions provides evidence of complementary cross-marriages between men from pastoral cultures and hunter-gatherer women. Marriage, the idea of a pair bonding, seems to have been not just practiced but the norm.

Excavation of Çatalhöyük, in what is now Turkey, dates from around 7000BCE. It is the oldest known human settlement of any significant size, about 8000 people. Kinship and household life served as the basis of social organization.

The evidence from the archaeology suggests that these ruins represent individual family or kin group dwellings where children were raised within the family.

Maynes and Waltner make the point that

“Family socialization is key to the construction of cultural or national identities. Cultural capital and religious values are also transmitted within families; families shape individual and collective predispositions and destinies.”

It is within the family and by extension, through marriage that an environment is provided to impart to the next generation the culture and mores of the society.

Evidences for marriage being found across time and cultures include:

- Marriage within the Yangshao culture (5000 BCE) has been noted by archaeologists as they examined DNA evidence from skeletal remains showing women were married from one village out to another.
- Excavations in Paloma on the Peruvian coast showed that households, man, woman and children, were the basic units of production, consumption and ritual. 12
- Many origin myths use the idea of marriage within the story. E.G. in the Egyptian story the sun god Re and the goddess of the night Nut were married with 5 children. Osiris married his sister Isis and Seth married his sister Nephthys.
- Maya origin myth has a couple as the original founders of humanity.
- The aboriginal Arrernte culture (near Alice Springs) has complexed marriage laws without written records to keep track of them of state authorities to enforce them.
- Classical Hindu texts dating from 2000BCE describe marriage rules.
- Likewise Buddha himself was married and had a family.
- An ancient clay tablet from Sumer in the Euphrates Valley dating from around 2000BCE records a list of dynasties and kings only possible of course with the existence of both marriage and family traditions.

Going back even further into the past Mary Leakey discovered 3.5 million year old “first human footprints” in East Africa. The trail, left in fresh volcanic ash, shows a couple walking side by side followed by a child.

Owen Lovejoy, professor of anthropology at Kent State University, known for his work on reconstructing the skeleton of “Lucy” identified as an Australopithecine, believes these footprints show that pair bonding between male and females had occurred in the very distant human past.

Edward Westermarck published, in 1891, a monumental 3 volume encyclopaedia of marriage customs called *The History of Human Marriage*. His extensive survey of a wide variety of cultures led him to state;

All societies honour some form of marriage. Marriage is the natural and normal relation between the sexes in mankind.

Tucker in his book *Marriage and Civilisation* makes this observation:

The organisation of human society is unique in nature. Of all the species ever identified, approximately 95% are polygamous. However the evidence suggests that humans are by and large monogamous.

The adoption of social monogamy created something unique in nature – a society where males cooperated at common tasks with a minimum of sexual competition. Marital monogamy then allowed couples to pair off in an orderly manner.

However this adoption of what for other species is not natural required a couple of factors to exist;

- The society had to be willing to establish social rules to maintain monogamy
- The following of these rules meant an application of self-discipline by the people involved.

In the last decade the driver for human development has come to be seen as, the task of getting along with each other and surviving in the tight-knit environment of social monogamy.

It is intelligence *and* self-restraint that mark humans as humans, and marriage and monogamy play into the development of both of these.

It seems clear from the evidence from both archaeology and anthropology that ‘pair bonding’ or marriage has been an integral part of human society across time and culture but what do we really understand marriage to be?

Sherif Girgis, Ryan Anderson and Robert George in their book *What is Marriage* pose the following questions;

- Why is marriage, across cultures, legally regulated?
- What makes it different to friendship in such a way as we would not legally regulate friendship but we are OK with legally regulating marriage?
- Why is marriage between two people only?
- Why is marriage more than an emotional bond with someone?
- Why does rearing children tend to enrich marriage and only marriage?
- Why is marriage more than two people having a sexual encounter?

How then do they answer these questions? Page 36 of their book...

“Like non-marital friendship, of course, marriage is a type of bond. But marriage is a bond of a special kind. It unites spouses in body as well as mind and heart, and it is especially apt for, and enriched by, procreation and family life. In light of both of these facts, it alone objectively calls for commitments of permanence and exclusivity.” 36

Evidence from across the world’s cultures points to the family as being the most important environment for the development of the next generation of society’s members. It is in the family that children learn what it means to be firstly human and secondly a member of the particular society into which they have been born.

The argument from Girgis, Anderson and George is that marriage is the most effective and logical bond between two people that societies rely on to produce what they need but cannot secure: that is, healthy, upright children who become conscientious citizens.

Marriage then is defined as “a comprehensive union of persons”; a union of will (by consent) and body (by sexual union); inherently ordered to procreation and thus the broad sharing of family life; and calling for permanent and exclusive commitment, whatever the spouses’ preferences.

It is comprehensive because marriage, unlike any other relationship a human being may enter into, unites 2 people in their most basic dimensions in their minds and bodies. True unity happens when different parts come together to work towards a shared goal. E.G. our

own bodies are made up of many different parts but the goal of the parts working together is to keep the 'whole' alive.

The goal of marriage is to provide the best environment into which children can be brought so as to provide society with something society cannot secure for itself in any other way, healthy, upright children who become conscientious citizens.

1/ Marriage is a comprehensive union because the married partners share with their intellect and emotions a common goal, the establishment of a stable, safe family environment.

But marriage is a comprehensive union because it also involves a bodily union. This is why throughout history the act of sex has been the sealing sign for a marriage.

This type of union, achieved by sexual intercourse, is impossible by any other means. In this action the couple becomes a whole, working towards a shared end.

“The marital act involves the most distinctively martial behaviour, bodily union in sex, chosen for distinctive marital reasons: to make spousal love concrete, to unite as spouses do, to extend their union of hearts and minds into the bodily plane.” Page 26

2/ Marriage is also a comprehensive union because the married partners are united in their pursuit of every basic kind of good. Marriage calls for the wide-ranging cooperation of a shared domestic life and it is this shared domestic life that is uniquely ordered for having and raising children.

Marriage and child rearing go together: family life enriches a marriage (hence to enormous lengths couples will go to in order to have children) and marriage is especially suited for family life.

“Procreation is the good that fulfils and extends marriage, because it fulfils and extends the act that embodies or consummates the commitment of marriage: sexual intercourse, the generative act.” 30

As discussed earlier when looking at the history of marriage, this is why monogamy is the norm for marriage. Child rearing happens best within a stable loving marriage between a man and a woman.

3/ Marriage is a comprehensive union when pursued as an exclusive and permanent bonding. Because marriage involves acts that unite spouses comprehensively and unites them in pursuit of a comprehensive range of good then marriage requires both permanence and exclusivity, whatever the spouses' preferences.

If bodily union is essential to marriage as legal and philosophical tradition places it to be; then only exclusivity and permanence continue this unique bodily union.

Because child-rearing is an open-ended task in which the parents coordinate their whole lives, then marriage requires undivided lifelong commitment.

Across both culture and time marriage has involved a bodily as well as mental union of spouses, a special link to children and domestic life and permanent and exclusive commitment.

It is these factors that make marriage different from any other human relationship.

Just because two people live together does this make them married? No marriage is more than this.

Just because two people have shared goals and aspirations, does this make them married? No marriage is more than this.

Just because two people are raising a child, does this make them married? No marriage is more than this.

Just because two people are engaged in sex, does this make them married? No marriage is more than this.

Marriage includes but is more than all of these factors. It is the comprehensive union of two persons, uniting their bodies and minds, designed for the process of procreation, in exclusivity and permanent commitment to each other.

The historical record of marriage holds in common what it considers the most basic to marriage – bodily union and connection to family life – these are nearly universal in marriage practice.

As David Blankenhorn (author of *The Future of Marriage*) put it;

“If you’re trained, as anthropology field researchers are trained, to begin at the beginning, you will report a cluster of related facts: Humans are social; they live in groups. They strongly seek to reproduce themselves. They are sexually embodied. They carry out sexual reproduction. And they have devised an institution to bridge the sexual divide, facilitate group living, and carry out reproduction. All human societies have this institution. They call it marriage.”
